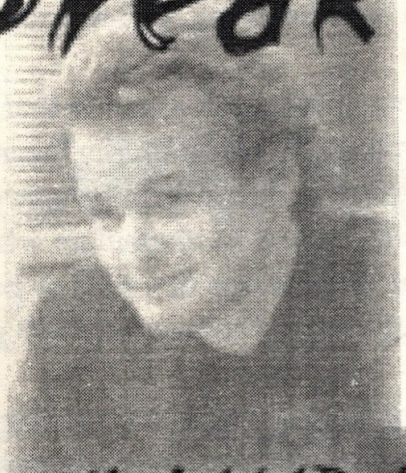
Spring Break



a Forever Knight/Buffy the Vampire Slayer crossover novella

Slayer Style

Valerie Meachum

Author's Note

What happens when you take a bouncing baby hit-to-be (all of two and a half weeks on the air when I first put pen to paper), and cross it over with a dear departed favorite that ended (not with a whimper, not with a bang, but with a heartbreaking, gut-wrenching *splat*) nearly a year before?

In some ways, it's an obvious choice. Each show is based on a movie that I loved, but which underwent sweeping changes in tone and cast on the way to becoming a series that I loved a lot more. Each is set in a world where dark, terrifying things happen every day (and, more the the point, every night). Each features a compelling cast of characters who face down those dark, terrifying things with hope, laughter, and the odd service revolver or pointy wooden thing. And, not surprisingly, there's a pretty substantial fan base overlap going on here.

Of course, there were also all those pesky discrepancies a crossover writer always finds herself faced with. Things like differences in vampire rules could be addressed within the story. Things like almost everyone dying on one show months before the other even began production...well, it *could*, but frankly I didn't want to deal. So just tell yourself that *FK*'s third season happened at the same time as *Buffy*'s first season, and that the whole shebang is 1996-97, and you'll be fine.

Because we're fans and can never do anything the simple way, you will find another novella with its own cover on the flip side of this zine: "Spring Break Sidekick Style," by the ever-brilliant Perri Smith. The two take place concurrently, and you can read them in any order you please. Personally, I recommend flipping a coin.

THANK YOU TO: A very big one to my partner-in-crime Perri Smith, for encouragement, suggestions, feeding the cravings of an itinerant Buffy junkie far from home, and most of all for her willingness to make this crazy venture a tandem thing. My beta readers—Chris Kamnikar, Lizbet Lewis and Amy Hull—for feeding my ego and still keeping me honest. Susan Garrett and Sharon Himmanen, for invaluable support, crash space, ice cream and cider. My colleagues on the Great Pooh Tour, for thinking it was cool and not getting me locked up when they saw me scribbling away during every spare minute in dressing rooms, hotels and coffee shops across the good ol' U.S. of A. And of course Jack Kessler, for being the best honey a girl could have. (Oooh, isn't that a pretty shade of red...)

Okay, I'll shut up now. Enjoy!

--Valerie

Disclaimer: This is an amateur publication, intended for the enjoyment of fans of *Forever Knight* and *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, and for the unofficial promotion of these programs. It is not produced in association with Sony Television, Paragon Entertainment, The WB Network, Mutant Enemy Inc., or any other copyright holder or licensee. This publication is neither intended nor expected to be a profit-making venture.

SPRING BREAK

SLAYER STYLE

(or Destructo-Girl Does Toronto)

† † †

by Valerie Meachum
with assistance from Perri Smith

Can you hear the child in tears
Whose innocence was stolen from her hands?
Can you hold her in your arms
And tell her that you'll try to understand?
When there's no way in hell you can...
Can you hear me? Can you hear me now?
Do you fear me? Do you fear me now?

--Tara MacLean, Evidence

Chapter 1

"So the upshot of all this," Natalie was explaining to Tracy as Nick approached their desks in the squad room, "is I'm going to have *two* sixteen-year-old girls in my apartment for the next week. Sixteen-year-olds from California, yet. You guys are going to have to call the nice young men in their clean white coats to come and take me away."

"Oh, come on, Nat," Tracy scoffed. "You handle scarier things than that before breakfast."

"Uh-uh. Mutilated dead bodies have nothing on teenagers," Natalie declared firmly. "I remember being one too clearly to kid myself about that. You should too; you did it more recently than I did. Maybe we should ask your dad. How many of Commissioner Vetter's white hairs are yours and yours alone?"

"Lots," the younger woman admitted readily. "But most of them happened since I became a cop."

"Okay, there is that. But still..." Turning to Nick, Natalie thought a moment. "No, I'm not going to ask you. I probably don't want to know."

"I find that hard to believe," he returned, wrinkling his nose at her. "But how did this become two teenagers? I thought it was your cousin and her daughter coming for your family reunion?"

"It was. That was before the plumbing in Joyce's gallery became demonically possessed." Natalie shrugged. "So she called yesterday and asked if we could let one of Buffy's friends use the plane ticket, come check out the University for future reference and broaden her horizons, that kind of thing. Not to mention keeping the poor kid from getting bored out of her skull surrounded by adults with too many initials after their names; I'd class that as the most important reason—"

"Wait a minute," Tracy interrupted. "They actually named this poor child Buffy? Does she have two curly blonde ponytails and carry a Mrs. Beasley doll too?"

"Believe it or not, that was pretty accurate last time I saw her. Except I think it was a stuffed pig. But that would be...yikes, twelve years ago! Summer before I started med school." With a sour face she added, "Time does fly, doesn't it?"

"You're not kidding," Tracy agreed. "And don't you give me that look, Nick Knight! I can be freaked by the fact that sixteen was ten years ago if I damn well feel like it. It's weird."

He wasn't sure what look he was giving her, but he wasn't particularly inclined to change it. "If you say so."

His partner's response was to gather up as much of her midlength blonde hair as possible into a crooked pair of ponytails and stick out her tongue at him, cracking up all three of them along with half the cops in the room.

† † †

The Buffy Summers who stepped out of the customs area most definitely did not match Tracy's hypothetical description, but Natalie recognized her almost immediately. This girl was, at least as far as her untrained adult eye could see, the coolest of the cool in the stylish façade department; but the smile and bright vitality of the little blonde demon she had met years ago were undimmed.

Buffy spotted her waving just as easily, and motioned to her companion, a wisp of a girl with long straight auburn hair and the air of a startled deer. "Hi!" Buffy greeted as they reached her. "Natalie, right?"

"Last time I checked."

Nodding sagely, the blonde girl noted, "Good thing to keep track of. Never know when you might unexpectedly turn into someone else. But you look pretty much the same as the pictures Mom showed me. Sorry I don't really remember meeting you myself; I was pretty short and clueless." She gestured to her friend. "Willow Rosenberg, Natalie Lambert. And vice-versa."

"Hi, Dr. Lambert. Thank you for letting us invade your house; it was really nice of you."

Natalie chuckled. "Any time. And it's Natalie, please. Well, ladies, welcome to April in Toronto! You missed the snow, but I'm glad to see you brought jackets. I guess your mom remembers *something* about life in a place that actually has weather, Buffy."

At the baggage claim, Natalie wondered privately whether the concept of packing for just a week was simply an unfamiliar one to Buffy; but a rental cart just fit her gear and Willow's more modest amount, and they were off.

† † †

"I've been on some tall things in my time, but *that* is a Tall Thing," declared the diminutive blonde perched on the edge of Tracy's desk. Nick guessed immediately that this was Buffy; the thick honey-colored mane and china-doll face dominated by frank green eyes made it easy to believe she and Natalie had emerged from the same gene pool. A redheaded girl about the same age stood behind Nat, who was seated at his desk.

"That would be why it's the tallest man-made structure in the world," Tracy reminded her, smiling at the girl's enthusiasm. "Oh, hi, Nick."

"Made by some very bored and/or overachieving men," Buffy noted. "I mean, that comparison chart—it is just *so* much taller than all the other tall things. Building something that tall just for it to be tall...it pretty much boggles."

"Just when I start to wonder why we always take people to the CN Tower when they visit Toronto," Nick chuckled. "We get to watch them boggle."

"Buffy Summers, Terror Tourist!" She considered this a moment. "Has a certain ring. So, you're the famous Nick Knight, huh?"

"Famous? Since when am I famous?"

He directed this with raised eyebrows to Nat, who shrugged and looked innocent. "Don't look at me. This is your partner's doing."

Tracy held up her hands, protesting, "I just told them if they wanted to know about what it's like to be us, you were the one to ask. It's pretty slow this week; maybe Captain Reese will let us give Buffy and Willow a little tour."

"Willow Rosenberg," the girl standing behind Nat clarified with a shy little wave. "It would be really cool if you could...if there's stuff we can see...I mean, if it's okay and everything."

"Sure, if you guys are really interested." Nick shrugged. "It's really not all that exciting most of the time. And, as Tracy said, it's particularly unexciting at the moment."

"Exciting is not required," Buffy assured him. "In fact, after the amount of time we spent on planes today, exciting is nowhere *near* the top of the list. Interesting will be just fine."

"Okay. Willow?" The girl started slightly as he addressed her. "That go for you too?"

"Um, sure. Interesting. Interesting is good."

"Well, it's fine with me," Natalie added, "as long as you can drop them off at my place when you're done. Otherwise we'd have to leave right now; I'm off tomorrow, but tonight is non-negotiable."

Grinning, Tracy stood up. "Great. Then it's settled, once I check it with Reese."

"You seem awfully eager," Nick said, eyeing his partner curiously.

"What? Can't I be excited about my career and eager to educate curious young minds?"

"And avoid typing up the final report on the Ridberg case a little longer?" he countered.

He'd caught her, but to her credit it only showed a little. "This is a much more important public service than finishing a report on a closed case, don't you think?"

"Yeah, it sounds like more fun to me too. Go ask Reese already."

† † †

"So what we finally figured out," Nick explained as he maneuvered his huge old Cadillac around a corner, "was that if the clues didn't really mean anything by themselves, maybe there was some kind of word puzzle with their names—"

"Like those scramble things in the paper on Sundays," Willow burst out, cheerfully oblivious to the fact that she was interrupting a grownup she had met less than two hours before. Normally that would mean they might not have heard a peep from her by this time, but Nick had encouraged her questions even when he hadn't known the answers himself, several times pestering colleagues specializing in the technological and scientific tools of police work to answer them for her. "Where you fill in words from clues, then take one letter from each one for the anagram at the bottom? Except sometimes you can have two words for the same clue, and it's not like a crossword where you can get some of the letters to know which one it is, so you're trying to unscramble the wrong thing, so of course it doesn't make any sense, which is really frustrating until you finally figure out that you needed a different word in the first place. And then you're like, 'oh, of *course*,' and I'm sorry, you were telling a story. I'm listening."

"Actually, that's it on the money," he chuckled. "Now imagine doing that while navigating a VR game with the time limit running out, with the prize being the real murder weapon needed to prove an otherwise circumstantial case."

"Sounds cool. Well, except for that last part. I don't like playing games for anything really important."

"Hear, hear," Tracy spoke up. "Luckily, like Nick said, that definitely takes the prize for the weirdest way we've ever cracked a case."

"Sounds like about the weirdest bad guy, too," Buffy ventured.

"That...would be a closer contest," said Nick. "But yeah, she'd rank right up there."

When the scream rang out nearby, it was all Buffy could do to keep from demanding that Nick stop the car so she could leap out and confront whatever ugsome thing had caused the scream. Because,

of course, this wasn't Sunnydale. They weren't on a Hellmouth, and the likelihood that the scream *had* been caused by any brand of ugsome thing was, well, not very likely.

Non-ugsome things that caused screams weren't in her jurisdiction—unless there was no one around who was more qualified—but they were in Nick and Tracy's. The bubble light on the dashboard came alive, and Nick pulled the Caddy to as abrupt a halt as was safe on the semi-busy street, double-parking it next to another car and leaving the light flashing. Another scream sounded as he climbed out of the car, drawing his gun and focussing his attention in the direction Buffy was also certain the screams had come from.

Tracy grabbed the microphone of the two-way radio. "Dispatch, this is 81-Kilo, on Mifflin Lane near College Street. Investigating two screams from a building on the west side of Mifflin. Stand by for possible backup request." Weapon in hand, she got out of the car too, nodding acknowledgment as Nick pointed toward an apartment building.

Poking his head back in for a moment, Nick instructed, "You two stay put. And if you see anything happening, get down." Then he stood, slamming the driver's side door, and he and Tracy disappeared around opposite corners of the apartment building.

For a moment the two girls just stared after them, then Buffy laughed shortly. "Well, *this* is a thrill a minute."

"You said you didn't want exciting," Willow reminded her.

"Well, no, but sitting in the back seat of the car with Mr. Blue Flashy Light to keep us company wasn't exactly what I had in mind either."

"Well, at least it's not—"

They both jumped at the sound of a gunshot. At the same time, something went *zing* in the back of Buffy's brain. "Vampires."

She wasn't entirely aware she'd said it aloud until Willow looked nervously around the car, whispering, "Where?"

"Give you three guesses," Buffy replied dryly, casting an appraising eye over the building their tour guides had gone to investigate. "Well, Giles is always saying I should work on the ol' Slayer sense, 'cause you never know when it'll come in handy. Just my luck it decides to kick in on my vacation."

"What are you going to do?"

"My job. Nick and Tracy don't know what they're walking into." Not that she had any weapons on her, but it wasn't like it would be the first time she'd had to improvise. But Willow... "Here." She unclasped the chain of the cross hanging around her neck, pressing it into her friend's hand. Not much, but it could buy critical time. "Keep the doors locked and try to keep out of sight. I'll be right back."

"O-okay."

She would have to make sure she kept that promise to be right back, Buffy thought as she closed the car door and headed the direction she had seen the two cops go. There wasn't exactly an unlimited warranty on Willow's ability to stay where she was if she decided the Slayer might need backup. And Nick and Tracy and the unidentified screamer would be enough extra humans to keep track of.

Keeping to the shadows as she crossed the narrow yard, she scanned the ground beneath the trees for a branch that could be pressed into service as a makeshift stake. By the time she reached the building she had found one, and held it ready as she peered around the corner.

The building was U-shaped, open toward and mirrored by the one next door. Tucked into the space was a courtyard with a basketball hoop and a couple of picnic tables. A woman in a yellow jacket lay sprawled across the far table, dead or unconscious. In front of her stood a wild-eyed guy with a handgun pointed at Nick, who was about thirty feet away from him, with his back to Buffy. Tracy was nowhere to be seen.

"Put your weapon down slowly and keep your hands where I can see them," Nick ordered.

The guy was less than impressed—or just thundering psycho—because he responded by firing. Buffy's horror at seeing the bullet emerge from Nick's back, jerking him backward, lasted only a second. That was as long as it took for the detective to cross the courtyard, disarm the shocked gunman and twist him into an armlock.

With bared fangs and a low, inhuman growl.

She had taken half a step toward him when Tracy's voice from the back of the building sent her ducking further into the shadows. "Nick?"

"I'm okay, Trace," he called back. Buffy waited the few seconds it took for Tracy to get into the courtyard and out of direct line with her hiding place, then peered carefully around the corner again. He was back in human face—not that he'd been that far out of it, she realized—and putting handcuffs on the speechless loonytoon. "See if you can do anything for the victim; I'll call it in."

Frozen to the spot—had he seen her?—Buffy watched apprehensively for anything fishy. Tracy checked the woman's pulse and breathing, then pulled off her own long leather jacket and put it over her, leaving her face uncovered. Still alive, then. Meanwhile Nick pulled a cell phone from his pocket, requesting a patrol car and an ambulance.

By then it was clear that he wasn't going to pull a vamps-gotta-do-what-vamps-gotta-do right here, and the puzzled Slayer decided it was about time she got back to the car and pretended she'd never left.

"Are you okay?" Willow asked anxiously as she climbed back into the Caddy. "Was there—I mean, did you...?"

"I didn't. I don't know what to think." Accepting her cross back and latching the chain around her neck, Buffy added, "It was Nick."

"The vampire was after Nick?"

"The vampire *is* Nick."

"Oh. Oh!" Willow's eyes went wide. "But how? I mean, a police vampire? Why?"

Buffy shook her head. "I don't know. But I couldn't exactly jump out and confront him with the evidence—he was in the middle of arresting this guy with a gun, and there was a woman there who'd been shot. And then Tracy got there and they were just doing normal police things. I don't get it."

"Do you think Tracy...?"

"Uh-uh. And I don't think she knows. He de-vamped before she saw him. I only saw him for a second. And I *hope* he didn't see me, though I don't know how he couldn't."

"Well, maybe he's a good guy?" Willow ventured. "I mean, there *are* a lot of vampires in the world. Angel might not even know he's not the only good one."

"Maybe," Buffy allowed. "I sure hope so. I mean, everybody at the police station likes him. And Natalie too. I think she *likes* likes him."

"Well...he's easy to like."

"I know. So this is definitely not a 'stake first, ask questions later' situation." A squad car pulled up behind them, lights flashing, and Buffy looked across the yard to where Nick was leading his prisoner toward it. "But I'm definitely going to ask some questions."

Chapter 2

"Oh, Wil, it is *so* you!" Buffy enthused as Willow emerged from the fitting room, or rather the jury-rigged arrangement of curtains that passed for one in a typical Queen West boutique. "You *have* to get it. It's perfect for the show tomorrow night. And it's even on sale, how can you beat that?"

"You think so?" Willow looked doubtfully over her reflection in the knee-length, empire-waist dress of fluid emerald-green velvet. "It's not...you don't think it's...well, too much?"

"Absolutely not." The blonde girl turned beseeching eyes to her cousin. "Natalie, back me up. Is this an utter imperative, or what?"

"That might be a *slight* exaggeration," Natalie cautioned. "But it is nice, Willow. I figured the stores in this neighborhood would be more Buffy's style, but it looks like you lucked out first." She couldn't resist adding impishly, "And exactly how *does* one gauge 'too much' with all the Goths and drag queens around here, anyway?"

"It's perfect," Buffy insisted before Willow could say anything else. "And you don't have a dress for Spring Fling yet, right?"

"Well, no, but I don't know if—"

"See? Kill two birds with one stone. Two evenings with one dress. Whatever."

Natalie didn't need to have known them for more than a day to know that Willow was doomed. They seemed an odd match for best friends in the image-obsessed teen world; but Buffy clearly had enough self-confidence for both of them—at least!—and could be a bit single-minded about instilling it in the shyer girl. Which evidently meant Buffy felt it her duty to make sure Willow looked good and got the attention she deserved, even if the prospect of such attention terrified her.

Natalie didn't blame her; she wasn't sure what she would have done if a Buffy had come along and attempted to drag her sixteen-year-old self into the high school spotlight. Probably exactly what Willow was doing: sputtering ill-defined excuses, then giving up and buying the damn dress. And feeling like some kind of impostor wearing it. Eventually, though, she'd learn that Buffy was right, if a trifle heavy-handed: nobody was going to like you for yourself if they didn't see you there in the first place.

Sure enough, Willow squared her shoulders and headed for the cash register at the front of the shop, with a beaming Buffy right behind. Natalie followed them, shaking her head, then frowned as she looked out the front window. In the half-hour they'd been here, the vaguely threatening clouds had ceased threatening and begun dumping themselves in grey sheets on the street outside. "Well, I was *hoping* we'd get finished before the rain. Not much fun to walk around if we're getting drenched." Looking at her watch, she shrugged. "I guess it's about time to get back and start dinner, anyway."

The girls exchanged an inexplicable look, and Buffy said, "There was, um, something in one of the stores we were in before that I want to go back for. You guys go ahead; I'll meet you back

home."

"Oh, we can go back with you to one place," Natalie assured her.

"Well...it's kind of...a surprise?"

"Ah. I see." That explained the un-Buffy-like hesitation. "Well, in that case, I guess we'll see you in a little while. You know which subway to take and everything, right?"

"Right," Buffy assured her quickly. "I'll be *right* behind you. No problem."

Chuckling, Natalie replied, "Don't worry, I don't think Willow and I will polish off the *whole* pan of lasagna before you get there."

"But we can try." Willow straightened suddenly. "Oh! That was a drag queen?"

† † †

She could *not* believe she was doing this. It wasn't like slipping into the sewers in Sunnydale, not by a mile. This guy probably had alarms on his alarms. Giles would murder her when he heard about this...assuming Nick didn't beat him to it.

But so far, so good. And what was up with a vampire living in a loft with a skylight, anyway? Springing the lock was total cake, and Buffy tensed in expectation of an alarm, but heard nothing. Could he really be that brain-dead?

She slipped through the skylight and dropped to the floor some twenty feet below, stake already in hand. She just had time to congratulate herself on the particularly silent catlike finesse of the move before finding herself relieved of the stake and pinned by a pair of steel-solid arms in way upscale black silk pj's.

"Buffy?!" Nick's voice asked incredulously at her left ear. "What the hell are you—ow!"

She slammed an elbow into his stomach and almost slipped free, but he shifted his grip to become a human—scratch that, vampire—straitjacket, giving up on covering her mouth. "Your little game of cops 'n' robbers is so over! No more free lunch!"

"Will you stop kicking me and listen for a second?" he pleaded. "Buffy, just—ouch!"

Her wriggling had earned a split-second opening as he adjusted his grip again, and she seized the opportunity to drop through the circle of his arms, using a back kick to his knee to propel herself toward the stake on the floor about six feet away. Grabbing it, she hit the floor in a diagonal shoulder roll and came up with her attention—and the business end of the stake—focussed in his direction.

The shock on his face lasted only a second, replaced by a look of calm concentration. "You don't need that," he told her, his quiet voice echoing weirdly around the inside of her skull. "Put down the stake."

"I'm sorry, caller, we don't take requests," she quipped in response. "If you were caller #13 when we played the Mystery Song, you would qualify for a chance to get barbecued or guillotined instead, but I'm afraid skewering is all we have in the Prize Bag today. Better luck next time." She tightened up her aim and prepared to let fly.

Nick held up his hands. "Buffy, don't!"

To her own surprise, she didn't, though she remained hair-trigger ready. "Give me one good reason."

"I caught you breaking into my apartment. I didn't hurt you. I'm not planning to."

"I'm listening," Buffy conceded reluctantly. "So why not?"

"Why should I?" he returned. "The worst I have any reason to do is arrest you, which I'm not

going to do, even though *you* haven't given me any reason why I shouldn't."

"Nice act. I give it an eight. You *are* a vampire; I saw you. And don't bother trying to talk me out of it. You *are* the droids I'm looking for."

Nick blinked, then nodded as comprehension dawned. "Well, Nat will be interested in evidence suggesting that's genetic." Before she could ask what was genetic or why Natalie would be so interested, he continued, "But I still don't have any reason or intention to hurt you."

"Oooh, aren't we picky! About every other bloodsucker I've ever bumped into thinks I qualify as gourmet lunch."

"Lunch is in there." He pointed to the refrigerator, several feet to her right. "It's cow. Every drop. Has been for a hundred years."

"Oh." Buffy let this process for a second. "You mean you don't...I mean, ever?"

"Ever," he confirmed. "Whether or not the mortal in question is a guest and relative of my dearest friend. And whether or not she threatens me with a stake while dripping several gallons of rainwater on my carpet."

"Oh." She glanced down at her sodden clothing. "Wow. Bad hair day in my personal psychic reading." Nick started to step toward her, and stake and eyes both snapped back in his direction. "*Ever* ever?"

"*Ever* ever," he answered patiently. "I am now going to move from this spot in order to get you a towel and see if Nat has a change of clothes stashed here somewhere. If you kill me, you'll never find them, and you'll wind up with pneumonia, and then your cousin will probably find a way to resurrect me so that she can kill me herself. Okay?"

Even if it was a trick, she had to laugh at that one, not to mention at his relieved expression when she lowered the stake. "Okay."

"Okay." He pointed at a remote control on the arm of the couch. "That starts the fireplace. Get it going and start getting dry. We need to talk."

† † †

It was several minutes before Buffy emerged from the bathroom in the extra pair of Natalie's scrubs that he had found for her, but she seemed ready for a calm conversation by that time. "These things are major-league comfy," she remarked cheerfully. "Could use some more color, though."

"You should see the ones Grace gave her on April Fool's." Nick studied the damp, harmless-seeming teenager for a long moment. "You're a Slayer, aren't you?"

"One girl in all the world, with the strength and skill, blah, blah, blahdy blah," she sighed. "Why do you even ask? Seems like I have a big target painted on my head or something."

"Or something," he repeated, shaking his head. "There is something that...feels...different about you. But I always believed all that was a myth."

"Now *there's* a reality check." The comment could have been pure Nat. "Couple years ago I didn't believe in vampires. I never wondered whether they believed in me."

"Some do, some don't."

"Fair enough. Your turn. Are you another Gypsy curse case, or what's the sitch?"

He stared blankly at her. "Gypsy curse?"

"I'll take that as a 'no'. Actually, let me rephrase that." Obviously there was a story there, but she wasn't about to tell it to him. "Do you have a soul?"

Equally obviously she didn't go in for the easy questions. After a long moment, Nick answered, "I believe I do. I have to believe it, or everything I've fought for is for nothing." Meeting her direct gaze with a dry half-smile, he added, "Just do me a favor and don't ask me what shape it's in, okay?"

Buffy's eyebrows went up questioningly. "What, you could tell me if I did? You have a Soul-O-Meter next to your toothbrush?"

"Not exactly. I have a pretty good idea what it looks like, though. Let's just leave it at that for now."

"Deal."

Nick took a deep breath, not sure how his next statement would go over, and less sure what he would do if it didn't. "Buffy...I have to ask you not to hunt while you're here in Toronto."

"You have to know I can't promise that," she answered immediately. Just for a moment it seemed she could not possibly be a mere sixteen. "Even if I wanted to—and I'm not saying I don't, necessarily—I've tried to get away from it before. I can't, any more than I can change my fingerprints. I'm the Slayer. For keeps."

"I understand that. Believe me, I understand 'for keeps'."

"Yeah, I guess you would."

"But I'm not asking you to get away from it. Just...take a vacation."

She laughed shortly, and for the first time Nick glimpsed the slender thread of bitterness woven through her acceptance of the hand fate had dealt her. "I thought that's what I was doing. Then you happened."

"But I don't need slaying, right?"

Buffy shrugged. "Doesn't seem like it right this second."

"And you haven't seen any more of my kind?"

The look she gave him completely defied categorization. "If you're really for real, I don't think there *are* too many more of your kind."

"You know what I mean."

"Yeah. And no. I mean, no, I haven't."

"Good. So don't go looking for them." A little more lightly he added, "And try to keep a low profile so they don't come looking for you."

"And if they do?"

She was so matter-of-fact about it! Even Nat's fearlessness had been known to show cracks at that prospect, but he knew without asking that Buffy had already experienced equally close shaves. It wasn't just adolescent ignorance talking; this was what she *was*. "Then you'll have to defend yourself. I wouldn't want you not to." He sighed. "We'll just have to hope it doesn't come to that."

Her wariness with him had faded into the background, and now to his surprise she reached across the length of the couch and gave his hand a sympathetic squeeze. "It's okay, really. I can take care of myself."

"Oh, I know you can," Nick assured her ruefully, rubbing the knee that still felt slightly bruised from her kick. "But that's not the only reason."

"You don't want me killing your friends? I guess I can relate to that."

"Well, that *is* another reason, although my ties to the Community aren't exactly the strongest. But there are others close to me, mortals close to me, who would feel the repercussions."

Without a second's thought, she asked, "You mean Natalie, right? She's mixed up in all this

somehow, and you're afraid somebody will get her."

Sometimes, he decided, that matter-of-factness of hers could be very disconcerting. "I'd rather not go into too much detail—for everyone's safety, and yours not the least—but that's exactly what I'm afraid of. Right now she's relatively safe because they owe her a very large debt, but if you start hunting them and they connect you back to her...which they *will*..."

Buffy held up her hands. "Say no more. The Slayer is officially on vacation. Very low-profile vacation." Curling her legs under her, she looked thoughtful for a moment, and now very much sixteen. "That's the really rotten part of this gig, y'know? Anybody around me is automatically in the line of fire."

"And you feel it's all your fault, but nothing you do can change it. And you try not to get too close to people, so they won't wind up in the line of fire. And it doesn't work."

"No, it sure doesn't," she agreed, then looked up at him intently. "So, you're obviously 180-proof head-over-heels. What's the meter reading on Natalie's end?"

Nick just stared at her for a moment. "I think I'd better let her decide how to answer that one. It's...complicated."

"Um, duh. I kinda figured that."

Laughing, Nick shook his head. What *hadn't* she figured? "Sun's down. Come on, I'll drive you back to Nat's."

Buffy's face fell. "Ohhh, baby, am I gonna have to do some fast thinking on this story!"

Grinning, he offered her a hand up from the couch. "Voice of experience: I recommend the truth. She can handle it, and you won't get away with anything else."

† † †

"A *what*?"

"A vampire slayer," Willow echoed helpfully as Buffy winced from Natalie's astonished yelp.

"You know about this too?" Now it was Willow's turn to wince, though their hostess' voice had dropped to a more reasonable level.

"Sure. I help out...well, as much as I can, anyway. Mostly I look stuff up. Buffy's the Chosen One; she generally handles the actual slaying part." Willow grinned brightly. "I like to call us the Slayerettes."

"Chosen One," Natalie mused dryly. "Slayerettes. And exactly how many is 'us'?"

This was not going at all the way Buffy had hoped. "Slow down, Wil. I think we better explain one thing at a time."

"I think you'd better," Natalie agreed.

Offering an uncertain smile, the Slayer ventured, "I was going to make up something you'd believe, but Nick said you could handle the truth."

"Oh, he did, did he?" Natalie crossed her arms, levelling a serious Look at him. "Well, then maybe he should help you out."

Nick shrugged. "She's doing fine. It's exactly like she says."

"That she's a vampire slayer? Now, Liam O'Neal was one thing, but—"

"Not like O'Neal," Nick corrected. "He had an experience that drove him to become a hunter. Buffy is a Slayer. More precisely, *the* Slayer; there's only one at a time, and always a girl. She was born that way. Well, not exactly; they don't come into their full powers until they're called..." He

trailed off, shaking his head. "I just know fragments of legend. You should really let Buffy explain it."

"Well, I wish *someone* would explain it."

"Okay, okay," Buffy sighed, "I'll give you the rundown. And don't blame me for the style; the script is way overdue for an update." She made a token attempt to put some life into the recitation, and failed miserably. "As long as there have been vampires, there has been the Slayer. Into each generation is born a Chosen One, one girl in all the world with the strength and skill to fight the vampires and demons and stop the spread of their evil. One Slayer dies and another is called." She shrugged. "That pretty much covers it."

Natalie squeezed her eyes shut, pinching the bridge of her nose. "It does? How do you figure that covers anything?" She looked back and forth from Nick to Buffy several times, with a glance at Willow for good measure. "Excuse me. Did you say demons?"

"Yep. Lots of 'em. They come in all flavors. Seriously annoying; I know variety is the spice of life and all that, but the standard-issue vampires are a *lot* easier to deal with."

"Demons," Natalie repeated, casting a sideways look at Nick. "As in, the kind that possess people?"

"That's one trick I haven't seen in action," Buffy answered, "at least not yet. And really not my jurisdiction. I mean, what would I slay? I pretty much just deal with the ones that go around in physical form taking people's hearts and stuff. Well, there was one that sort of possessed Willow's computer; do you think that counts, Wil?"

Her friend shuddered. "Can we please not go there?"

"Right. Sorry." Turning back to Natalie, the Slayer continued, "Anyway, Giles is the expert on all the demons and the mystical stuff. He's the Watcher; it's his job to train and prepare me. Which mostly means keeping all these books and scrolls and tablets and anything else that has writing on it and gathers dust, so he can figure out what we're up against and how to fight it."

"I see. And where does this Giles come from?"

"I dunno exactly. England somewhere."

Rolling her eyes, Natalie clarified, "I mean, why is he the...Watcher? Is this another 'destiny' thing? Is he the one who told you all this?"

"Not exactly. I had another Watcher before, in L.A. He was like mondo weirdo, but pretty cool in his own way." Buffy gulped. "He knew I wasn't ready to go after Lothos, but I wouldn't listen. He died protecting me."

"Lothos?" Nick repeated with a low whistle. "So that's where he's gotten to."

"Had gotten to," Buffy corrected. "Past tense. You knew him?"

"Only by reputation."

"Yeah, well, whatever his rep was, he deserved it. He deserved everything he got...but it couldn't bring back Merrick, or the other people he killed." She sighed. "It did, however, get me expelled for burning down the gym. That's why we moved to Sunnydale."

Natalie shook her head. "Joyce only told me you'd been in some trouble. Does she know what you were really doing? Does she know you're still doing it?"

"No! She can't. Nobody can...well, nobody's supposed to. It's not safe. Giles knows, because he's my Watcher. And Willow and Xander...well, they kind of stumbled into it, and refused to stumble back out!" This last was delivered with a mock-severe look at Willow. "And now you guys, of course. But you're a special case, obviously."

"Obviously." Natalie crossed her arms. "So your information about being the Slayer comes

from these Watchers. And what do they say would happen if you didn't go looking for trouble?"

"They don't have to say it," Buffy replied solemnly. "I've seen it. The Master and his minions would totally take over. There's no one else to stop them."

"So says Giles?"

"So I've *seen*," Buffy repeated. "Anyway, if I don't go looking for trouble, trouble comes looking for me. That's the annoying part of the destiny thing. If I play ostrich, I'm just going to get munched." She shrugged. "It's true what they say, you know. The best defense is a good offense."

"And this is *your* job?" Natalie pressed. "What about Giles? They also say knowledge is power. What does he do while you're out risking your neck?"

Nick had been silent throughout the exchange, but stepped in as her tone grew sharper. "Nat..."

But the Slayer could defend her own Watcher, thank you very much. "He watches my back," she replied, just as sharply. "Without Giles, and Willow and Xander too, I'd be so toast by now. I'd still be the Slayer, even if I never met a Watcher in my life. I just wouldn't know how to do anything about it. So don't *even* get on Giles!"

Momentarily shocked by the outburst, Natalie said nothing for a moment. Then, more calmly, she asked, "Why you?"

Buffy shrugged again. "Why not me? It has to be somebody."

"That's debatable, but we'll leave that one alone for now. How does it happen? What makes it you and not someone else?"

"I don't know. It just is. You're born, you get to be a kid for a while, then somewhere the last Slayer dies and the next thing you know you're breaking door handles and leaping tall fences in a single bound and ditching cheerleading practice to sit in the graveyard with some weird old English guy." At some point it had become desperately important to make Natalie understand. "This isn't something Merrick and Giles just made up. It's for real, ever since forever, and if I don't do it then people die and the demons take over. I mean, Nick can deal, and I almost killed him!"

"Nick doesn't have to answer to your mom for what you get up to this week." Natalie's expression was still distinctly skeptical, but at least she was listening. "Look, I haven't written it off yet. I just can't accept it without any examination, okay?"

"Okay. That's fair." As an afterthought Buffy added, "And I already promised Nick I'll be really on vacation this week. No proactive slayage till I get home."

"Okay." Natalie sighed. "Now let's back up to the 'breaking door handles' part..."

Chapter 3

The customs agent looked at the passport, then back at the young man who had handed it to her. She really must be getting old; she would have bet good money that this one was jailbait, but the document clearly stated that he was twenty-two. Which was a relief, since he was the sort of bait that might be worth going to jail for—teen-mag jeans model material, with wavy dark hair and intense eyes of an improbably deep blue.

Resisting the temptation to look for the telltale edges of contact lenses—or just to keep looking—she looked over his declaration form. Marcel Bodilis. Born in Marseille, France; U.S. citizenship through mother. Resident of Torrance, California for three years. Travelling on vacation. No goods to declare. "Is the information on this form correct?"

He grinned at her—damn, the kid even had *dimples*—replying, "That's why I put it down."

"I know, but we have to ask anyway." She smiled back, and pounded the red rubber stamp in the appropriate spots. "Welcome to Toronto, Mr. Bodilis. Enjoy your stay."

"I'm sure I will."

† † †

"Natalie, can I talk to you a minute?" Buffy looked very small and vulnerable in the borrowed big fluffy bathrobe, and her voice held the note of a problem too big to handle alone.

Setting her book aside, Natalie replied, "Of course. Come on in." To her surprise—since the girl's best friend was the only other person in the apartment—Buffy shut the bedroom door behind her as she entered. "One of those only-a-grownup-can-help things?"

Buffy shrugged. "Willow's heard all about this already, so she doesn't need me waking her up with it. And I guess it is kind of an only-a-grownup thing, except that you're pretty much the only grownup who would qualify for this one."

"Something about vampires?" she guessed.

"Oh, yeah." There was a pause, then, "So, you and Nick are kinda, like, involved, right?"

Natalie's heart missed a beat. "Did he tell you that?"

"No!" Buffy answered hastily. "Well, not on purpose. He just...well, he's the Visible Man. It's totally obvious you're the only thing in the room to him. So I asked him about it and he got all embarrassed and said I should ask you." Shaking her head, she added, "I used to think they only did that in high school, but he's way past high school."

"Way," Natalie agreed. "In most respects, at any rate. As for your question...it's complicated."

Buffy wrinkled her nose. "That's what he said. That much I know on a first-name basis, thanks anyway."

"Well, there aren't any rules to go by, except all the ones that say it's crazy and impossible,

so...wait a minute." The significance of the girl's last comment had just become clear. "Oh, Buffy. Who is he?"

"Angel." The tone of her voice on that one name said it all. "And it's exactly like you said," she rushed on. "It's crazy. Impossible. He's a vampire, I'm a Slayer. We both know that doesn't work. Game over."

"Except it isn't."

"No." Buffy rested her chin on her knees, her mind obviously far away. "No, it's a lot of things—most of which I don't have names for—but over is definitely not one of them." She turned beseeching eyes to Natalie. "Why can't we just walk away?"

"Believe me, I have asked myself that very question a thousand times."

"So what's the answer?"

Natalie shifted next to the miserable teenager and put an arm around her shoulders. "Because a vampire isn't all Angel is, and a Slayer isn't all you are. Because nothing is as simple as whoever makes the rules would like to think it is. And because maybe, just maybe, you have something worth giving to each other. But you won't know that until you give it."

"I guess not," Buffy sighed. "It scares me, though, y'know? I mean, I'm not scared he'll kill me or anything, although I think he kind of is. But the one time he said he wanted to was when I threw him through a window because I thought he bit my mom."

Natalie blinked; the concept of petite Buffy throwing a vampire anywhere was still a tough one to grasp. "But he didn't."

"No. It was his ex, trying to set him up. Oh, and don't worry, Mom's fine. Anyway, I think he was mostly mad at me because I fell for it, and he got over it really fast. Then he tried to get *me* to kill *him*, of course, but...let's not go there."

"I take it he got over that too," Natalie remarked dryly.

"I guess so." A little shiver passed through Buffy. "I know he's done all these terrible things. I mean, he killed his own family. All however many Irish Catholic dozen of them. I can't even imagine that. And even though he's not like that any more, there's still that something about him that there is about all of them, that thing that says 'stay away or prepare to have your reality turned inside-out,' and am I making any sense at all?"

"I know exactly what you mean."

"And then he kisses me and none of it matters at all. And even in the middle of it I know he's just gonna disappear again until the next time he has some dire warning for me, and I don't even care that he's gonna pull a piece of me with him and I'm gonna feel sad and hurt and cheated because kissing him is the only place in the world I want to be right then, and right then it's worth it."

"But then 'right then' is over, and you're not so sure it's worth it any more," Natalie added.

Buffy nodded silently, and those tears made good on their threat. "It gets easier, right? I mean, you guys have been together for a while, haven't you? It has to get easier. Doesn't it?"

"I wish I could tell you it did." Natalie hugged her tightly, noting that the little burst of crying was already getting pulled under control, and not sure that was such a good thing. "Sometimes it seems like it gets harder by the day. Sometimes I think I can't stand one more minute of it. But if you gave me a chance to go back to where I was before Nick came along...I don't know if I'd take it. I'd be crazy not to, but...I just don't know. I think maybe I don't know how to be normal any more."

"I think maybe I never did. I used to think I did."

"Buffy, listen." She took a deep breath. "All things considered, I just might be the *last* person

who should give you advice about this. I can only tell you what I know; I can't tell you whether it's right or wrong."

Buffy replied with a wan smile, "Good. I never trust anyone who's totally sure they're right."

"Good policy," Natalie agreed. "I'm really not sure what to tell you. When I was sixteen I didn't understand how any one person could become the center of your universe like that. I saw it happen to other people, and all I could think was it meant their universes were too small. I had things to accomplish, I had friends and family. I did things that were important to me, and I was good at them. I wouldn't have hesitated to tell you my life was complete."

"But it wasn't?" Buffy prompted, clearly puzzled.

"Oh, I don't think I'd say that. For who I was, where I was, I think I was fine. For years. Then, one night, they brought me a bag of body parts that decided to put themselves back together, get up from the table, slurp down a bag of blood, and push the boundaries of my universe beyond anything I ever expected." She laughed shortly. "I was so fixated on puzzles, I'm not sure how long it took me to really acknowledge that this one came with a person attached. By the time I did...well, there wasn't a hole before he came into my life, but he'd leave a great big black one if he went out of it now. And that scares me more than any danger I have faced by getting involved in his world. All the logic and all the rules can't even touch that."

"Wow." The word was quiet, stunned.

"Yeah, that about covers it." Damn, she wasn't any good at this. She should be telling the kid to run screaming for the hills and never look back. "So...this Angel. Tell me about him."

"He's..." Buffy was actually speechless for several seconds; this had to be serious. "Well, I don't really know *that* much about him."

"I was starting to suspect that," Natalie sighed. "All right. How about what you do know about him? I don't expect he goes around telling just anyone that he killed his family, or that he's a vampire in the first place. What made him think he should tell you?"

"He didn't tell me," Buffy confessed. "Not right away."

Natalie had to bite her tongue through much of the tale, remind herself that this was a smart and sensible—not to mention *very* physically capable—sixteen-year-old. She deserved to be heard out before any judgment was made. But that took some doing when Buffy spoke of Angel's cryptic warnings; his letting the young Slayer tend his injuries and shelter him under her roof without telling her what he was, only to have it revealed in a momentary loss of control when he could so easily have killed her; his belief that his soul had been lost when he was brought across, and returned to him as some sort of punishment after a century as conscienceless predator; his self-destructive decision to allow Buffy to believe the frame placed around him, knowing she would kill him and counting it the easy way out.

When she was finished, Natalie began, "You came for an honest opinion, right?"

"Absolutely," Buffy replied with no hesitation. "You're the only person I know who has any idea what it's like. You've been there."

"Well, I haven't been precisely *there*," Natalie pointed out. "For one thing, I knew Nick was a vampire within about four seconds of knowing he was alive. For another, as much as I hate to say it...I'm not sixteen."

The briefest of smiles flashed across Buffy's face. "It's okay. You can say it. It's not like the subject hasn't come up, considering he is like fifteen times that." She cocked her head curiously. "How old is Nick, anyway?"

"Eight hundred, give or take."

"*Eight* hundred?" Buffy darted a glance at the door past which Willow was sleeping before lowering her voice. "Eight hundred. And you're..."

"Thirty-three. And let's skip the long division on that one, shall we? We're talking about you and Angel."

"Right. Back to the honest opinion. Which is that I'm severely mentally scrambled for having anything to do with him?"

"No," Natalie assured her, chuckling at the choice of phrasing. "I'm not entirely sure what I think yet, but you can safely eliminate that from the list."

"So committing me isn't the answer. What does that leave?"

"Learning more about who *he* really is, for one thing. Which sounds like a bit of a challenge. So that's one mark in the 'con' column."

"Uh-oh. This sounds like we're going to be logical about this."

"You catch on quick. So..." Natalie trailed off expectantly. "Help me out here. It's your relationship."

"Okay, okay." Heavy sigh. "Pro: he's *the* cutest thing in sight. Con: he's not the most open guy I've ever met. Which is saying something."

She was faltering already, and Natalie picked up the thread. "Pro: he's warned you about trouble brewing with your vampires."

"Con: he has a problem with fighting them himself, and mostly just keeps telling me where and when to do it." Buffy's frustrated tone lightened. "Pro: he's pretty handy to have around when he does suck it up and decide to get in on the action."

Natalie nodded. "Con: this 'Master' character knows about the two of you and could potentially use Angel against you."

"Or vice-versa," Buffy agreed glumly. "Been there, done that, not raring for a replay. But then... Pro: he knows a lot about how the Master thinks. And hates him a *lot*."

"Sounds like he hates all of them a lot. Which could be a 'con' if it gets out of hand. How do you think he felt about killing Darla? How do you feel about his killing Darla to protect you?"

Buffy thought about this a second. "I guess I can't answer the second until I know the first, huh? And we can do this pro and con thing all night, but I won't really get anywhere until I can find out how he feels about things. Because I worry about it."

Now she was on a roll, thinking aloud, and Natalie sat silent to let her follow it through.

"In a way, Darla did me a favor, tricking me into hating him. Now I know how that feels, and I *know* I don't like it. I slay vampires because it has to be done, and I'm the one who's qualified to do it. It isn't personal. It can't be. When I went after Angel, it was like the hate switched off part of my brain; and I need all the brain I can get if I'm going to do this job and have any kind of life besides."

"I won't argue with that."

Buffy shook her head sadly. "Angel lives with that hate all the time. And how can he have a life? He can't stand being one of them, and he can't be one of us. He doesn't belong anywhere...except maybe with another misfit." She made a sour face. "Like a Slayer, for example. That's what I'm scared of, I think. I don't want to end up where he is. I want to belong somewhere...besides in dark alleys and sewers mopping up assorted demonic critters for the rest of my life. Getting involved with Angel doesn't exactly help that."

Here she stopped, though the thought was clearly unfinished, and Natalie prompted, "But...?"

"But he's been all alone for a hundred years, hating them. Hating himself. With me, he has something other than hate. I don't want to be where he is...but I don't want to just leave him alone there either."

"Sounds like you know a lot more than you thought you did," Natalie ventured. "It's a good start, anyway."

"Natalie, do you think there's a reason for things? I mean, like fate. Destiny. Dentyne. Whatever."

"Fate, no. But reasons...yes, I think there probably are. Usually I even believe that if I work at it hard enough, I can figure out those reasons and everything will make sense." She studied her young visitor curiously. "And you? What do you believe?"

"Jury's still out on most of it," Buffy admitted. "I mean, Giles is always going on about how I'm the Chosen One because it's my destiny; and I go along with it because it's just the way he operates, and it's like this whole tried-and-true Watcher thing. And it works and everything, and mostly there isn't really time to wonder why." She shook her head. "But then I wonder what kind of wacked-out destiny would decide I should fall for Angel on top of being the Slayer. I mean, it's not like the job isn't hard enough."

"I'm sure. But the Slayer isn't all you are, remember? I may not believe in destiny, but I do believe in the grand and glorious untidiness we call human emotion. And I believe you can't stop thinking about Angel because at least part of you thinks he's worth the trouble." Hugging Buffy again, she went on, "Unfortunately, nobody but you can decide whether that part of you is right."

A wistful smile. "Why can't we have them without the trouble?"

"Oh, wouldn't that be nice?" Natalie agreed. "Or maybe not. Maybe we'd get too bored. But we'll never know, because it just doesn't work that way."

"Yeah."

"Why do I think I've managed to make things worse?"

"No, no. I just have a lot more information to process. And I didn't really expect you to have any magic answers; otherwise you and Nick wouldn't both be pulling that 'complicated' routine."

"Ha. True enough."

"I guess it just helps to know that if I'm going to be exploring totally uncharted territory here...at least I'm not the only one."

"Would it do any good at this stage to tell you to be careful?"

Buffy just smiled. "G'night, Natalie. Thanks for listening. And for talking."

"Any time. And I do mean *any* time. Good night."

† † †

Buffy yawned, then blinked. She smelled—

"Cinnamon rolls!" Natalie exclaimed from her bedroom doorway, anticipating Buffy's identification of the aroma. Raking unruly hair out of her face, she grinned at the equally sleep-mussed Slayer and called toward the kitchen, "Hey, Willow, I think we're gonna have to keep you around! Do you do this all the time?"

"Only when I wake up early and hungry," came the reply. "You said to help ourselves; I hope it's okay..."

"It's great," their hostess assured her, eyes going wide, as she and Buffy entered the kitchen.

Fruit, toast and juice were already on the table, and the coffee-maker was cheerfully burbling away. "Definitely have to keep you around."

Buffy shook her head firmly, pulling out a chair and reaching for a glass and the juice pitcher. "Uh-uh. She's ours. Way irreplaceable. Where would I find another morning person still willing to participate in vampire slayage?"

"That would not be Xander," Willow agreed with a giggle, a faint blush creeping up her cheeks. "Besides the fact that his idea of the perfect breakfast is last night's cold pizza."

"Now, cold pizza has its merits," Buffy said, internally debating whether to call her friend on the gratuitous use of the absent Slayerette's name in a mostly unrelated conversation. It wasn't much of a debate. "Okay, Wil, pop quiz: scrumpdillyicious gourmet breakfast with anyone else, versus cold pizza with Xander. Do I bother trying to get anyone to bet me which one you opt for?"

"Buffy!" That blush was now well beyond the faint range, and she raised her eyebrows meaningfully at the Slayer. "Do we really need to bore Natalie with the trivial high school soap opera details of our lives?"

Natalie's grin told Buffy she had an ally even before she spoke. "Oh, by all means, bore me! Convince me that you two *have* trivial details in your lives." Darting a sidelong glance at Buffy, she added, "Just tell me yours is human."

"Excruciatingly human," Buffy jumped in to assure her. "Well, except for the hyena incident..."

"Hyena incident?"

"...but that's pretty much irrelevant. It is absolutely 100% guaranteed safe to say that hers is human."

"He isn't actually *mine*..." Willow demurred.

"That would be the main soap opera plot element at work here," Buffy explained sagely. "It all hinges on the profound cluelessness of Boy X, a chronic condition *aggravated*"—this was directed as pointedly as possible at Willow—"by the terminal reluctance of Girl W to untie her tongue and claim what everybody *else* knows is rightfully hers."

"It's better algebraic form to say Girl Y," Willow mumbled in protest.

Levelling a mock Look at her, Buffy replied, "What, as in Yolanda? Cordelia's second lady-in-waiting to the left? Oh, *so* not. If ever there was a tongue in *need* of tying...even Xander isn't *that* clueless."

"Don't be so sure. You didn't see what she was wearing at the Bronze last Tuesday."

"Ah, no. As I recall, I was having an action-packed, laugh-a-minute Tuesday evening in..." Buffy trailed off, glanced at Natalie, decided that the word *graveyard* would be even more gratuitous in this conversation than *Xander*. "Elsewhere. There was missage of the Bronze action. I take it Xander saw what Yo-Yo was wearing?"

Willow nodded morosely. "Saw it a lot. To the noticeable detriment of all verbal and several key motor skills."

"Stellar as they are under normal circumstances," Buffy sighed. "Okay, so that calls for a resounding thwack. But that's only a treatment, Wil. A cure *is* available. Stake your claim already, girl."

Eyes going perfectly round, Willow shook her head firmly, then stopped in mid-shake. "Wait, what do you mean, everybody else knows? Who everybody? When did we become an everybody thing? I thought we were an everybody ignores thing."

"You are an adorable thing," Buffy insisted. "An everybody goes 'awwwwww' thing. Or at least they will as soon as you guys get around to becoming awww-able! Right now you're an every-body waiting thing." Turning to Natalie, she asked, "Now, is it fair for her to keep everybody waiting?"

"Life is unfair," their hostess pointed out. "High school life doubly so. I'm staying out of this one."

Buffy wrinkled her nose. "You're no help."

"You don't need any. Sounds like you're giving Willow all the help she can handle, right, Willow?"

"Buffy's right," Willow admitted. "But it's hard enough to think about telling a boy I like him when he isn't a boy who remembers me falling out of his treehouse and winding up with seventeen stitches in my scalp. One who doesn't have blackmail pictures of me with a shaved spot an inch wide and four inches long."

"I remember that story. Weren't you guys *nine*?"

"Well, yes, but—"

"And Xander made you sit in his go-cart and pushed you five blocks to your house because his mom wasn't there to take you to the hospital?" Buffy pressed. "Your own personal knight in shining armor. In training. Ignoring the fact that it would have been a lot easier to just *call* your parents, what could be wrong with this picture?"

"He called me Frankenklutz for three weeks."

Chuckling, Natalie put in, "Willow, from what I remember of such dealings with boys—be they nine or sixteen—the only thing wrong with that is a language barrier. I admit I'm rusty, but I think that translates as a pretty impressive compliment."

"Yeah. What she said. Anyway," Buffy went on, "he *is* still in training. And while he's definitely getting knightlier and shinier, he needs to do some remedial work to get your-personaler. He's never gonna graduate without some tutoring in that one."

The phone rang then, and Natalie gave them a pause-this-until-I-get-back grin as she rose to answer it. "Hello? Yep. Hi, Beth. What's the word?" She made a sour face, rolling her eyes. "No-body? This isn't just out of town company, this is out of the country company."

"Some would say out of the dimension," Buffy agreed in a stage whisper.

Covering a laugh at this, Natalie continued, "Yeah, yeah, I know. I didn't have a prayer against the Leafs game. But I had to try. You just tell our dear Dr. Cameron he owes me an *extra* dozen double-chocolate-chip cookies for last month. Sure. Thanks anyway. Bye."

"No joy on handing off dissection duty tonight?" Willow guessed.

"Right the first time." Natalie shrugged. "I should have known. No guilt trip is powerful enough to oppose the hold of hockey playoffs on the Canadian soul."

"Well, we don't *have* to go tonight," Buffy offered. "It was really Mom who had her heart set on seeing *Phantom* again. I mean, we saw it in L.A. a few years ago anyway."

"Yeah, me too," Willow agreed, adding wistfully, "But everybody says the Toronto production is the best."

"Nobody says you two can't go," Natalie assured them. "And I'm sure you'd be okay by yourselves on the subway or in a cab, but I don't know that Joyce would be so thrilled about that."

"She wouldn't go for it," Buffy confirmed. "She's more okay with it in Sunnydale—an irony upon which I will refrain from comment—but when it's a real city, 'groups of four or more' is kind of tattooed on the mom region of her brain. Made it really interesting to keep the slayage a secret in L.A."

"I'm sure it did." Natalie thought a second before continuing, "Speaking of knights in shining armor, I think Nick is off tonight. I'm sure he'd be willing to take you, if that's okay with you."

Buffy shrugged. "I'm cool with that. I even promise not to beat him up this time."

"That would be appreciated."

"Strictly a no-stakes occasion," Willow agreed with an impish smile. "We'll bring him back in one piece, we promise." Smile fading, she added in an apologetic tone, "I wish you could come, though. We'll talk him into taking you next time."

Regarding them for a long moment, Natalie finally said, "You know, I think you two could actually manage it. I'll consider myself warned."

Chapter 4

Having grown up a good Valley Girl, Buffy had always firmly believed southern California to be the mall capital of the universe. Oh, she'd heard of that "Mall of America" thing in Wisconsin or Minnesota or one of those iceboxes that passed for states in the Midwest, but that was just something they did to get attention for something other than unimaginable amounts of snow. They put a theme park in the middle of the thing, for crying out loud; it was obviously an anomaly. Or maybe an aberration. She wasn't sure which.

At least, so she'd believed until today. Buffy, meet the Eaton Centre; Eaton Centre, Buffy. About five blocks long, three levels in some places and four in others. It was just a teeny bit overwhelming. And that was before the clerk at Roots had said, "Oh, this is nothing. You should see a couple of the ones out west."

All in all, she wasn't sure which was weirder: a gargantuan mall in the more-or-less-middle of downtown Toronto (didn't malls belong in the suburbs anyway?), or the fact that they were due to be met there in a few minutes and escorted to the theatre across the street by a cute blond vampire who was terminally jonesing for her mom's cousin. When he wasn't out serving and protecting. With a badge. Were they *trying* to fry her few remaining brain cells before she even caught a glimpse of post-sophomore summer?

"It's awfully romantic," Willow sighed over her half-finished cup of chai, pulling Buffy's attention from the swarm of post-dinner shoppers.

"Yeah, in a twisted tragic multi-Kleenex kind of way," Buffy agreed. "That would be why it's made zillions of dollars, after all. All the romance novel junkies wish they were Christine, and wish she'd stayed down there, yadda yadda yah." She shrugged. "Personally, I want to see what happens when Raoul figures out that if she's learned how to yell at poor Lasagna-face like that for taking over her life, he's *so* not getting a good little trophy wife. Now that's sequel material for you. But the Harlequin-hounds would probably riot in the streets or something."

"Oh. That too." Willow flashed a grin, fidgeting yet again with the twirling tendril Buffy had left loose from the elegant chignon that was the *only* proper complement to The Dress.

They made quite a pair, between Willow's velvet and her own navy-chiffon-over-powder-blue-satin slipdress with its matching scarf; and it was fun to watch Willow gradually accustom herself to getting second looks when she was in no danger of running into anyone she knew. "That too?" Buffy repeated. "What were you talking about?"

"Nick." Willow dropped her voice. "Can you just imagine, if he does get to be human again? It's almost like he *had* to be a vampire, because the perfect person didn't come along for eight hundred years; but if she can cure him and—"

"Whoa, girl, that's an awfully big *if*," Buffy chuckled. More seriously, she continued, "And in the meantime I get the feeling there's not a lot of perfect going on. I don't think they're a very happy

thing right now; they remind me of my mom and dad when they were still trying to pretend everything was fine."

Willow's crestfallen look was almost enough to make her take it back. "You think so? But...I mean, Nick did say they knew somebody who'd made it back."

"Yeah. And I thought Natalie was going to hit him. Or cry. Or both." She shook her head. "Whatever that was about, I don't think they consider it an option. Which is worse than not having any options at all."

"I guess. But don't you ever wish..."

Okay, this one was getting stopped right now. "Wil, I love you, but don't go there. Just...don't."

"I'm sorry."

"Me too." And she really was; Willow looked as if she'd been slapped. "I didn't mean to snap at you. I just...that's not something I can afford to start thinking about." She happened to glance over Willow's shoulder just in time, and swerved sharply into, "Because...you *know* the, um, history term paper is a strictly forbidden topic during break. It's just too traumatic."

"History?" Willow repeated, puzzled. "But that's not—"

"Not anything I want to deal with this week," Buffy insisted firmly. "Oh, hi, Nick!"

"Nick!" Willow whirled around in her chair, suddenly comprehending and pasting on a big, slightly crooked smile. "We were talking about our history term paper. Except we, uh, weren't. Because...it's vacation. And that would be bad. To talk about. Hi."

"Hi." By some miracle, he managed not to laugh aloud at this singularly articulate display, though amusement crinkled the corners of his eyes. "Wow. Nat warned me I'd have to glare sternly at every boy in Toronto to keep them off you two, but I had no idea. You ready?"

Willow blushed right up to her widow's peak—predictable—and Buffy answered cheerfully, "Mad money duly committed!" She held up three good-sized shopping bags as confirmation. "Can we stop by the car to put this stuff away?"

† † †

"What a fine night for the theatre," LaCroix remarked genially to Nick's left. "How are Dr. Lambert's young guests enjoying the evening?"

"Fine." Nick replied evenly, darting a glance to where Buffy and Willow chattered brightly in the line for the ladies' room before turning to frown at the elder vampire. "Have you been spying on Nat for any particular reason, or did you just get bored sitting in your broadcast booth?"

LaCroix, as ever, was unruffled. "Now, Nicholas, I wouldn't dream of violating the good doctor's protected status. Though it seems to me that harboring a Slayer is hardly the wisest choice if she wishes to retain that status."

"I don't know what you're talking about."

"Of course you do. And actually, it isn't me you need to worry about. The girl is dangerous, but so long as she makes no trouble for me I see no reason to waste my time on her. That's what we have Enforcers for, after all." As Nick suppressed a shudder at the thought, LaCroix went on, "Marcel, on the other hand, seems to have a personal quarrel with her."

"Marcel?" Nick repeated.

His reaction must have been clear, because LaCroix went on, "Yes, I thought that might be a

name you wouldn't want to hear. He arrived last night from Los Angeles with some very colorful tales about the charming Miss Summers. It seems her career began on an...explosive note." He cast an unreadable look toward the restroom, where the girls had finally made it inside. "Personally, I would hardly count that fool Lothos and his followers as a great loss, but Marcel doesn't see it that way." He smiled coolly at Nick. "Or perhaps he simply has a taste for Slayer blood."

"A taste for causing misery, you mean," Nick muttered.

"For elaborate games, then. I confess, I'm curious to see how he plays this one. I expect he'll start by making a pawn of her little friend, but from there...who knows?"

"He could be underestimating them both." Nick wished he could feel as confident as he was trying to sound.

"Do you really think so, Nicholas?" LaCroix laughed. "Marcel has made playthings of mortal hearts for six hundred years. He has brought whole dynasties of worldly aristocrats to their knees. How difficult do you suppose he will find it to seduce one painfully shy young girl?" At Nick's sharp look, he continued, "I told you, I haven't spied on Dr. Lambert. But watching you play chaperon has been an entertaining diversion from my...boring broadcast booth. The Slayer could handle herself quite well, no doubt, but the other one...?" He looked out over the crowded lobby, and Nick followed his line of sight to where Buffy was waving for a merchandise vendor's attention. "Come to that...where *is* the other one?"

Nick didn't bother with a parting word or glance, but threaded his way through the press of theatregoers as quickly as possible. "Buffy, where's Willow?"

"She's right..." She turned all the way around with a frown. "She *was* right here. Maybe she—yeah." Brightening, she pointed toward the front doors. "Sometimes she doesn't do crowds all that well; just needs to grab some air, I guess."

Nick spotted Marcel before seeing Willow beside him. "Not with *him* she doesn't."

"Vampire?"

"One of the worst."

"Check." Something hard clicked into gear in her eyes. "Let's go."

Intermission was nearly over, and they had to struggle against the flow of traffic to the street. Buffy reached it first, Nick a few seconds later.

"No sign of them. You start left, I'll start right." She took charge as naturally as breathing, not even waiting for a response before starting off. The Slayer was in her element now, acting with a focus and efficiency that would frighten him when he had time to think about it. But Willow's life, perhaps her soul, hung in the balance; and time was too precious a commodity.

† † †

The night air was cool on her bare shoulders, but no more so than it might have been at home. Spring really was sprung, and Buffy counted her blessings for it. The uncertainty about what has happening to her best bud was bad enough; conducting this hunt in last night's rain would have been nearly impossible.

She had sent Nick searching north from the theatre entrance, so she could head south and make a quick stop in the parking lot. It hadn't seemed prudent to mention it, but not all the dents in her vacation fund had been made by clothes. The archery equipment displayed at the front of the sporting-goods store had caught her eye more firmly than anything else they had passed. As if she needed more

proof that a higher proportion of her brain cells was dedicating itself to slayage every day.

Silently vowing not to gripe the next time such an instinct struck, she applied a little persuasion to the trunk's latch, suddenly much happier with the detective's relic of a vehicle. The lock wasn't flimsy, but it did afford more purchase for determined little Slayer fingers than a newer car would have. Hoping none of the pedestrians passing on the nearby sidewalk noticed her unorthodox methods, she grabbed the compact but well-made bow and the three whole wooden arrows the confused clerk had been able to scrounge up. There had been no way to explain to him that fiberglass was great for durability, but barely bothered the undead; so she hadn't tried, just repeated that she was *very* sure she wanted wood, thank you.

She nocked one arrow and held the others in the last two fingers of her left hand. It wasn't her crossbow, with its space for extra ammo and ability to cock the string ahead of time; but it would have to do. Now a couple passersby did eye her strangely, but she ignored them and continued down the block, peering into every shadow and willing her errant sixth sense to activate.

It wasn't answering. Still, she'd made it the last year-plus mostly on logic and hunches; and right now a hunch told her that narrow alley just ahead and across the street looked awfully dark and suspicious. Crossing as quietly as she could, she crept along the wall to the corner, then stepped into full view of the alley.

Later she would decide that what she saw could have been worse, but right now she was very not happy. The dark-haired vampire had Willow in a heavy-duty lip lock, one hand gripping her arm while the other combed through her now-loose hair. Her hands were flat against his chest as if she had been trying to push him away, but her eyes were closed and there wasn't much pushing happening there.

Both stood in profile to Buffy, making it impossible to take any kind of aim at his heart. She'd never be able to close the twenty-foot distance without him noticing her—if he hadn't already in the half-second she'd been standing here—but there wasn't anything else to do.

Not surprisingly, it didn't work. She was halfway there when he turned to face her, pulling Willow in front of him as a shield and keeping a firm grasp on her arm and hair as he backed away.

Willow blinked dazedly at her, the single corkscrew curl bobbing crazily in front of one eye. "Buffy? Where did the theatre go?"

"We have a party-crasher, Willow," said her captor, a deeply kick-worthy smirk crossing his face. If Buffy could just get at him to kick it... "Really, now, Slayer, jealous that she's having all the fun? Wait your turn. I've got time."

"Let her go, creepazoid," Buffy snapped at him.

"Oh, come on, you can do better than that," he scoffed. "You have such a *reputation*! Don't disappoint me, now, let's hear some of that famous Buffy Summers wit!"

"What do I look like, a street clown?" she shot back. "Hey, you want a show, you buy a ticket like everybody else. By fighting for it, not hiding behind my friends!" When he made no move, she added, "Unless you're afraid you can't take me..."

"I'm not stupid. I told you, you have a reputation." The smirk grew slowly into a wide, predatory smile. "But then again, so do I. Wouldn't want it getting all tarnished over this."

He shoved Willow behind him, giving Buffy a clear shot. "Say goodnight, Spacey!"

It all happened in a blur; she had never seen a vampire move so fast. What was *in* the Toronto blood supply, anyway? At least they weren't as freaky-looking, she found herself thinking irrelevantly as the unknown bloodsucker snatched the arrow out of the air, tossed her a gloating fanged grin, and

vanished with a *whoosh*, leaving Willow behind.

A couple seconds passed before she registered the arrow shaft in Willow's left shoulder, and it seemed the other girl still hadn't registered it. As she rushed over, she realized the scumwad had stuck the thing right into the wooden fence that closed off the end of the alley. "Willow, don't move," she said as calmly as she could manage, racking her brain for a way to free her friend and keep her from going mental in the process.

"Where'd he go?" Fortunately, Willow was a step or two behind in processing the events of the last several moments; but that initial shock wasn't going to last long, and then what would they do?

Before she could answer, though, another *whoosh* behind her grabbed Buffy's attention. She whirled, ready to go at it hand-to-hand, and narrowly avoided breaking Nick Knight's nose.

Taking this in stride, he looked quickly from one face to the other. "Marcel just let her go?"

"Not exactly." Buffy jerked her head toward the dark stain beginning to spread from above Willow's collarbone.

She could see the analysis of the situation flash across his face, and he stepped close to the pinned girl, drawing her attention to himself before she could also follow the less-than-subtle signal. "Willow, listen to me," he began, taking her right hand in both his own. Buffy recognized the soft, persuasive tone, and fervently wished him better luck with it this time. "Everything will be all right. Just keep very still."

It seemed to be working; Willow's gaze was fixed unblinkingly on his face, and she sounded like she was talking in her sleep. "Keep still. Okay." Then her hand tightened on Nick's and she came partially out of it. "Ow! Something's wrong. Buffy?"

"I'm right here, Wil," Buffy assured her. "Just listen to Nick, okay?"

"Willow, take a deep breath and let it out slowly," he instructed, stroking the back of her hand to coax it out of the vise grip on his. "There is no pain now. You're far away from it. Nothing can hurt you."

"Nothing can hurt me," she agreed dreamily, her hand going limp and the tension draining from her face.

"Nothing can hurt you." In a slightly different tone, but no louder, he added, "Buffy, on my signal you're going to break the fletched end off the arrow. Don't move the rest of it if you can help it. Okay?" Wordlessly she nodded, afraid her voice would break the spell. "Good. Then have your scarf ready to apply pressure on both sides to stop the bleeding."

At this, Willow snapped to full panicked consciousness, twisting to look at her pierced shoulder. "Bleeding? I'm bleeding?" She cried out in pain at the movement, and Nick gently turned her face back to him.

"Willow—Willow, shhh." He brushed her hair back with light fingers that also blocked the injury from her peripheral vision. "Keep still. There's no blood. There's no pain. It's all far, far away from you. You're safe. Just keep still." Murmuring more of the same and continuing the soothing touch on her hair, he nodded to Buffy.

Holding her breath, she placed her fingers at the right point on the arrow shaft and snapped it cleanly, twitching the long part ever-so-slightly and drawing a little whimper from Willow.

"Nothing can hurt you," Nick reminded the entranced girl. "The pain can't touch you. Everything is all right." Still holding her right hand, he placed his other hand flat against the back of her injured shoulder with the arrow shaft in the space between two fingers.

Now Buffy realized what the plan was. With the arrow stuck two inches into the fence, it

would be nearly impossible to pull it out of Willow without causing further damage to her shoulder. The safer option, then, was pulling Willow off the arrow.

"Now listen very carefully," he was saying. "In a few seconds, not yet, I'm going to ask you to move. You're going to take two steps forward and then stop, and I'll be right here with you. You will feel no pain. Nothing can hurt you. Do you understand?"

"Uh-huh."

"All right, Willow. Follow me...now. Step. Step." Willow did as he said, without the slightest wince or whimper. "Buffy, your scarf."

Without the arrow shaft to block it, the blood flow from both sides of the wound accelerated, and Buffy quickly pressed her scarf to it with both hands. She had forgotten she was holding her breath until she tried to talk. "You did it," she managed after letting it out. "Oh, God, I thought—"

Nick held up a hand to silence her—the one that wasn't still bracing the bleeding shoulder—then brushed his fingers over Willow's hair again, his thumb stroking her temple. "You need to rest now, Willow. You will sleep for hours, safe and warm where the pain can't find you."

Her eyes drooped, and he moved to support her slight weight as gravity started taking over. "Nothing can hurt me?" she asked in a tiny, childlike voice.

"Nothing can hurt you," Nick assured her again. "Sleep now." As she zonked totally out, he sank to sit on his heels, cradling her half-upright with her head resting against his chest.

Buffy knelt to follow, keeping up the pressure on the makeshift dressing. For the first time since he had arrived, she remembered with a jolt what he was; and the image of a snarling monster like those she was born to destroy warred in her mind's eye with the present reality of this person who held Willow as tenderly as if she were his own child. The last few days had given her a lot to think about. "She *is* gonna be okay, isn't she?"

He nodded. "And you don't have to whisper; you won't wake her." The normal conversational volume seemed incredibly loud at first. "She'll be fine. She'll be pretty sore for a while, but with youth on her side she'll heal before you know it." He glared at the broken arrow still stuck in the fence. "In a way, we're lucky Marcel is a cruel bastard. He did this to torture, not to kill." Peering into Willow's sleeping face as if to reassure himself that she was indeed safe from the intended torture, he added, "I'm just glad at least *someone* around here isn't a resistor."

"I'm just glad you showed up when you did," Buffy replied. "Even if he wasn't trying to kill her, it could have been a lot worse. I mean, I didn't know how to get the arrow out, or if I should even try; and I didn't know what to do if she panicked or went into shock or something..."

Nick shook his head, interrupting, "Hey, hey, stop right there. You can't beat yourself up about this. You can only do your best."

"Oh, gee, that helps a lot. I thought I could deal with this, with buds who refuse to stay out of my mess. But now...I couldn't protect her. I couldn't even help her after she did get nailed. I didn't have a clue what to do!" She shivered. "I still don't. What do I do next time when there isn't a convenient friendly vampire around to whammy her into the ozone? I can't exactly follow your lead!"

"I wouldn't be so sure about that. Legend has it that the Slayers have all our powers; they just have to learn to use them."

She stared at him. "Giles never told me that."

"He probably doesn't know. *If* it's true. Legend also has it that they don't generally live long enough to learn a fraction of what they're capable of."

That one hit home. "He didn't tell me that either, but I know it's true. Willow's been studying

the archives; I don't think Giles has noticed how far into them she's gotten. Average Slayer life expectancy is nineteen years and five months."

"They also haven't exactly made friends among those who could teach them," he pointed out. Before she could respond to that, he went on, "The point is, you can't be all things to everyone. Some things have to be someone else's job. That's why you *have* friends...and family." Reaching into his jacket pocket, he handed her his car keys and took over holding the scarf on Willow's shoulder. "Get on the cell phone and let Nat know we're on our way to her place before you pick us up." When she hesitated, he frowned at her. "You do have your license, right?"

"Learner's permit," Buffy admitted doubtfully. "I just hope I don't lose my chance to get my license trying to control that tank of yours. I guess I can handle it for a couple blocks."

She could almost hear him counting to ten. "Buffy, go get the car."

"Right."

Chapter 5

Natalie had beaten them home, and must have been watching for them; her apartment door was already open when they rounded the corner in the hallway. She had pulled out the sofa bed, and nodded toward it as she closed the door behind them. "Set her on the near side, on the flannel sheet. There's a plastic one under it, so we can just pull that out from under her when we're done, and not have to move her to clean up."

Buffy perched silently on the back of the sofa, arms crossed, as Nick followed the terse directions, careful to avoid jostling Willow or pulling the scarf away from her shoulder. "The bleeding is stopped for now," he supplied. "She didn't lose much other than what you see."

"Good job," Natalie acknowledged, never taking her eyes from her patient. She set her hand briefly on Willow's forehead, then counted the pulse at her wrist. "You hypnotized her?"

There was no judgment in her tone, only professional efficiency; but he felt the need to justify himself anyway. "I didn't see any alternative; she was starting to panic and make it worse. And I couldn't just let her stand there in pain."

Sparing him a quick smile, Natalie said, "I'm not lecturing, Nick. Just asking. It's probably better anyway; I'd be nervous about anyone but an adolescent specialist trying to figure a painkiller dosage for her, especially as little as she is. How long do you think it'll last?"

"Probably until morning, maybe longer," he answered. "She was fighting me, then suddenly stopped. I ended up pushing her a bit harder than I intended." Catching a sharp look from the Slayer at this, he added quickly, "But nowhere near enough to hurt her."

Buffy's eyebrows shot up. "But you could?"

"She's strong. It would take a lot."

"But you could," she repeated implacably.

"Yes. I could." He could no more lie to her than to Natalie; he would be in trouble if she developed the latter's habit of pursuing subjects on which he had long lied to himself. This one was relatively easy. "I learned those limits the hard way, Buffy. But I did learn them."

She nodded. "I believe you. And I'll be okay with that when I'm safely clear of the initial freakage reaction. I think." With a nervous little laugh, she concluded, "Now's just not the time for me to know more things that could have gone wrong."

He didn't know what else to say. Fortunately, Natalie recognized a need to be useful when she heard one. "Buffy, could you find a clean nightgown for her, please? Whatever she has that's loose."

"From Willow's wardrobe?" The girl jumped to comply. "Not a difficult order to fill."

"Good. Just have it out and ready, and then come help me over here."

"Okay."

While Buffy rummaged through Willow's suitcase, Natalie pointed to a basin of hot water on the end table. "Nick, hold that where I can reach it."

He obeyed, wrinkling his nose at the whiff of antiseptic that rose from it. Natalie fished a small sponge from it, wringing it out just enough to minimize the dripping; and set to work easing the stiffened remains of Buffy's scarf, and the ruined green velvet beneath it, away from the front of Willow's shoulder.

"I'm afraid the new dress is a lost cause," she commented apologetically, taking up a small scissors and snipping along the shoulder seam to carefully pull the fabric away from the wound. "Buffy, if you could start dunking gauze pads in that water for me? Give me one and have a clean one ready."

"Okay." Buffy gulped a little. "It's not as bad as it looks, right?"

"Right," Natalie confirmed. "Don't worry; once it's cleaned up it won't even look as bad. Looks like it missed bones completely, and there's just a very little muscle tearing..." She glanced up at the Slayer, who was holding out a fresh gauze pad and looking just a trifle pale. "And I'm telling you much more than you need to know right now. Back that up. Pretend I just said she'll be fine."

"Fine. Good. I can deal with fine," Buffy agreed.

In no time at all the wound was clean and closed by a half-dozen stitches. Willow mumbled something unintelligible in her sleep as they shifted her to repeat the process on the back of her shoulder. But she settled onto the pillow on the arm of the couch as if the odd angle were the most natural position in the world.

Natalie finished the last stitch and snipped the thread, then wrapped a gauze bandage securely around the shoulder. "We'll keep her from using the arm for a couple days, just to make sure the muscle heals right; but otherwise that should do it." Smiling at her assistants, she added, "Thanks for the help, guys. Now, if Nick will do me one more favor and step out in the hall for a minute, we'll get her settled in for the night."

† † †

"Giles, you really don't have to come! Everything is under control. Really. Would I lie to you?"

Nick and Natalie exchanged bemused glances, unable to avoid overhearing Buffy's phone conversation in the kitchen. It seemed Natalie had won the bet that the girls' mentor would not be as okay with the situation as they had been told he would.

"Well, okay, but that doesn't count. I have never actually, directly lied to you. I didn't...anyway, the important thing is we're okay. Okay, Willow isn't 100% okay, but Natalie says she will be in, like, nothing flat; and she's a doctor, so—" There was a few seconds' pause, and then, "Um, that'll have to be later, because I don't think I could wake her up right now...oh. 'Her,' Natalie, not 'her,' Willow. Just a second." Buffy appeared in the living room doorway, looking for all the world as if she were expecting a sentence of execution to be handed down any minute. "Natalie, Giles wants to know if he may speak to you, please?"

"He may." She gave the girl an encouraging smile as she accepted the cordless phone. "Hi. What do you need to know?"

"Hello, Dr. Lambert," a slightly nervous British voice replied. "What, um, exactly, do *you* know?"

"Considerably more than I'm supposed to. Which is pretty much the story of my life the last few years."

"I see," Giles remarked neutrally. "And your opinion is...?"

She sighed. "Well, the idea that Joyce's sixteen-year-old daughter is a born vampire slayer doesn't exactly thrill me. And the concept of blaming it on 'destiny' *really* doesn't thrill me. But, regardless of the cause, it *is* a reality, and I've gotten used to dealing with that particular brand of reality."

There was silence for a moment. "I'm sorry to hear that." Hastily he added, "But I'm relieved as well. Vampires in Toronto were not something we counted on when we decided that Sunnydale could survive a week without the Slayer."

"I hope that's true," Natalie put in. "I understand things get...interesting there. A lot."

"Yes, well, it's actually been quiet enough for a little while, touch wood. But I was quite alarmed to find that Buffy's been encountering vampires there, and waited until Willow was attacked before contacting me. I assumed she had decided once again that she could handle everything on her own; I feel somewhat better knowing that she does have a support structure."

"As long as you know that part of her support structure is a vampire himself," said Natalie.

"Yes." Now he sounded *very* nervous. "An unexpected development, to say the least."

"Unexpected developments are Nick's specialty," Natalie chuckled. "Although I'm starting to think Buffy might take that title away from him."

"I don't doubt it for a moment."

"Anyway, until tonight Nick was the only vampire the girls had met in Toronto. And he gave them the green light to tell you about him, but they decided as long as nothing was really wrong it could wait until they got home." She shrugged, glancing over at Buffy sitting on the edge of the hide-a-bed keeping watch over her friend. "Once something did go wrong, Buffy called you the minute she was sure Willow was all right."

Giles cleared his throat. "And she *is* all right? You're certain?" Before she could answer, there was another voice in the background at his end, demanding to know what was going on. "Excuse me, Dr. Lambert." There was a muffled comment to the other person, then, "My apologies, Dr. Lambert. Buffy and Willow's friend Xander is with me at the moment." There was an odd emphasis to the statement, and she gathered that Xander was not to know what sort of trouble the girls had encountered. "You were saying?"

Her initial estimation of this man who encouraged teenagers to go out and battle the forces of darkness had improved a notch or two in the course of the conversation. Clearly his concern was as much for the kids themselves as for their mission. "Well, I wouldn't let her swing from any ropes for a while, but yes, she'll be fine."

"Thank God," Giles breathed. "And thanks to your friend Mr. Knight, I'm told. Buffy says his intervention saved Willow's...saved us all a great deal of trouble."

Quickly Natalie assured him, "I don't think it was ever that drastic. Mostly it would have been a bigger scare than it already was. All she really needs is rest; Nick just gave her a head start."

"He has my gratitude. As do you, for restoring my peace of mind. Survival is all well and good, but I will sleep better tonight knowing she has good care and comfort. Though I may lose part of that sleep wrestling with the notion that she was spared worse suffering by...well, by those particular circumstances. I'm afraid that will take some getting used to."

Natalie smiled at the circumstances in question, wondering whether his sharp hearing was tuned in to the conversation. "I'm sure he'll understand. Any other questions I can answer before I give you back to Buffy?"

"Just one," he replied. "What hotel would you recommend when I arrive tomorrow morning?"

† † †

"Willow, can you hear me?"

"Hmm?" She had been aware of voices for a little while now, muffled and indistinct through her blanket of safety. This voice, the one coming through clearly, had wrapped that blanket around her; now he was drawing it away, letting the real world filter back in.

"Come on, sleepyhead." He picked up her right hand, shaking it gently. "You've got company coming."

Okay, the next step was opening her eyes. When she did so, she found Buffy cross-legged on the bed to her left and Nick sitting on the edge of it to her right. "What time is it?"

"Almost noon." Buffy smiled at her, but Willow knew her well enough to see she was nervous. "Natalie went to pick up Giles at the airport. I bet you're starving."

"Yeah, I am...okay, back that up." She processed Buffy's statements in reverse order. "Why is Giles coming? And how did it get to be noon?" Turning to Nick, she added, "Did you get stuck here? How come you're not home in bed?"

Laughing at the cluster of questions, he said, "Explanations are Buffy's department; mine is lunch. Back in a minute."

"Thank you *so* much," Buffy sighed as he headed for the kitchen. As she turned back to Willow, though, her smile returned. "Actually, I think it's the first time he's left the room since we got here. Oh, except when we changed your clothes, don't worry. He finally crashed for a while in the chair over there about 8:30, not too long after I got up. Natalie put a blanket over him; it was just too cute to be believed."

Considering the mental picture, Willow decided, "I believe it. But what's everybody so—ow!" It was about time she sat up, but her left shoulder didn't seem to think so, because there was a sharp stab of pain when she tried to move her arm, which was bound in a sling. "Oh. This would be what everybody's so worried about?"

"That would be it," Buffy confirmed, reaching to help her sit up and propping a couch cushion behind her. "So what do you remember?"

Before she could answer, the apartment door opened and Natalie ushered in one extremely anxious Giles, who made a swift beeline for the girls. "Thank God you're both all right!" he flustered. "Now, Willow, tell me what happened to you."

"Everybody seems to know that but me."

"Yes, but I've heard everyone else's version. Pardon me, almost everyone else's," Giles amended as Nick returned carrying a tray laden with more food than Willow would be able to eat in two hours on a bet.

He set it on her lap, then looked around uneasily at the roomful of mortals staring at him. "What's the matter?"

Covering a giggle, Natalie replied, "It's okay. You're just the only one in the room not up on what the average sixteen-year-old girl eats."

"More or less than a ten-year-old one?" Then he really looked at the tray. "Never mind. Stupid question."

"Not if that's what you were going by," Natalie assured him, shaking her head. "Though I'm

not sure I'd classify Lisa as 'average.' And I think you may have forgotten how much of that Schanke ate."

"That, I will *never* forget."

They exchanged a sad smile, making Willow wonder what the story was. But first, she really needed to get *her* story clear. "It's okay, Nick. Giles could probably use some sustenance too; airplane food can be pretty scary."

"Actually, I didn't really see any this morning," Giles said as Willow rearranged the two plates so that each held half a foot-long sub and a heap of potato salad. "Time zones and connecting flights will do that sometimes." Offering his hand to Nick, he introduced himself, "Hello. I'm Rupert Giles."

"Nick Knight." The vampire shook the Watcher's hand. "I wish we could be meeting under better circumstances."

"As do I. Though I am thankful they're not worse circumstances."

"Um...could someone please fill *me* in on the circumstances?" Willow put in.

Nick and Giles both looked to Buffy, starting in stereo, "I thought you were telling her—"

Buffy interrupted them with a piercing whistle. "We *were* just getting to that before the Charge of the Stress Brigade," she informed them. "Willow's been awake a whole ten minutes, guys. Let her get her brain cells oriented."

"You're right." Nick perched on the arm of the chair where Natalie was already sitting. "Take your time, Willow. What do you remember?"

She glanced up at Buffy, who had brought in a kitchen chair for Giles and placed herself on the arm of the couch next to Willow, unconsciously mirroring Nick. "I think there's an echo in here." She took a bite of her sandwich, acutely conscious of all eyes and ears on her. "Okay. It was intermission, and we were in line for the restroom for *eons*. Then we came out, and Buffy asked me which shirt I thought she should buy, and then this boy..." She frowned and took another bite. This was where things got flaky.

While she was chewing and thinking, Giles opened his mouth to say something, only to close it again when Nick shook his head. "Let her work it through first."

Giles nodded agreement, and Willow continued, "This boy asked me if I knew where to find an ice cream place after the show, and I said I didn't know because I don't live here—or at least that's what I meant to say, I don't know if it actually came out that way—and then he said...something else, and then we were outside."

She didn't much like the worried looks Nick and Giles exchanged, but she plunged on, fearing to lose the slippery thread of narrative and end up making even less sense. "That seemed weird, because I knew there were a bazillion people in there and I wasn't sure how we'd gotten past all of them, and I didn't think I wanted to go outside anyway because the show was only half over, and I started to tell him that, and then he looked really surprised and kind of annoyed and he grabbed my hand and pulled me up the street. I guess I should have screamed or something, but I didn't think of it right away, and then he pulled me into the alley and..."

She stopped cold, feeling a fierce blush spread up her face. If it was just Buffy, or even Giles; but with *all* of them hanging on her words, there was nothing to do but suddenly get very interested in her lunch.

After a few long seconds of silence, Buffy added her hand to Giles' on Willow's shoulder, and Nick spoke up, "Willow, it's okay. You haven't done anything wrong. Marcel looks, and when he wants to I'm sure he can act, like he belongs in your high school. But he is six hundred years old, and

he is possibly the most manipulative and pointlessly sadistic waste of a brilliant mind you are ever likely to meet. I would guess he got 'annoyed' because he couldn't control you as easily as he thought. You have nothing to be embarrassed about."

Easy for him to say. But he was right. Willow remained intent on chewing for a few more seconds before taking a deep breath and continuing, "He pulled me into the alley and said he would fix things so the Slayer would be the tagalong stuck following *me* around, and I told him that wasn't fair because Buffy isn't like that, but he just laughed and then...well, he kissed me."

There. She'd gotten that out, and with that block cleared the rest tumbled after it. "I don't think I kissed him back, because I don't think I would do that, but it was awfully long; and then Buffy was there and yelled at him for a minute and then he wasn't there and I was stuck and then Nick was there and I realized I was *really* stuck—like, to the fence—and then there's some fog and then I fell asleep."

As the words were spoken, a few pieces of the seemingly hopeless puzzle fell into place, and she looked questioningly at Nick. "You did that, didn't you? You got inside my head. So I wouldn't notice I was hurt and freak out."

"Yes." It was a simple statement of fact, but he was watching her reaction very closely. "Does that bother you?"

Uncertainly Willow replied, "I guess not. I mean, you were trying to help me and protect me and stuff, and if I'm going to have an arrow stuck through me I'd probably really rather *not* know about it, but..."

"But it bothers you."

"I guess so," she admitted. "No offense."

To her surprise, Nick nodded approvingly. "It should. You should never be comfortable with giving up your will to another, no matter who they are or what their intentions. This time it worked out, and I did help you. I wish I could say I've always used that power so wisely, but I haven't, even with the best of intentions."

"Oh." She digested this for a second, wondering if he had noticed the look Natalie was giving him and what it was about. "So, the boy...the vampire...the, uh, bad vampire. Marcel. He did that to me too, right?"

"It sounds like it."

Giles' hand tightened on her shoulder. "But do I understand correctly that she was in fact able to break his hold on her, at least to some extent?"

Again Nick nodded. "And you have to remember that, Willow, if Marcel or anyone else tries to control you again. What you did would come automatically to a natural resistor like Buffy or Nat—though there are some who can even get around them—but you had to fight for it. One of us can get into your mind and make it seem like there's only one thing you can possibly do or think, like you don't have a choice. But there is *always* a choice; the hard part is not letting them hide it from you."

Willow considered this a moment. "So how come when he did it I tried to get away, but when you did it I slept for fourteen hours?"

"Because you were confused and frightened and in pain," Giles answered for him, "and you chose to trust him to take that away. Is that a valid assessment of the situation, Mr. Knight?" At Nick's nod, he went on, "Then it seems we are very fortunate you are so trustworthy a soul."

Giles' wariness had resurfaced somewhere in the last part of the conversation, and evidently Nick could read that as clearly as Willow. "We're very fortunate that *I* learned there's always a choice,"

he returned calmly. "In my case, the choice to protect the innocent instead of preying on them. I don't have to imagine what would have happened to Willow if her choice to trust me was the wrong one; it was my reality for too long." The two men exchanged a long, measuring look, and Nick added, "It's also your choice whether to trust me, Mr. Giles. Maybe it's wisest if you don't."

"It's a difficult choice," Giles admitted. "I am grateful to you, and I do believe you acted in Willow's best interests. But I can't yet convince myself that your help comes without a price."

"The price was paid a long time ago," Nick answered soberly, "by more innocent souls than I can count. I owe it to them to keep Willow safe."

"He's for real, Giles," Buffy backed him up. "I chose to trust him too, and it was the right choice."

"Very well," Giles sighed. "I will put my suspicions aside as best I can. And I sincerely wish I were able to offer you more gracious thanks."

The vampire responded with a crooked half-smile. "We all have our prejudices to overcome here," he ventured with a glance at Buffy. "I'm not quite sure what to do with being defended by a Slayer. I guess we take it one step at a time."

"And for you, O Heroic One," Natalie told him, squeezing his hand, "the next step is to get some real sleep. If you go in tonight looking like you do now, Tracy will figure these two wore you out, and you'll *never* live it down." When he looked as if he were about to protest, she pointed firmly toward her bedroom. "You spend the day in my apartment, you follow my rules. Real bed. Real sleep. *Now.*"

"Okay, so I lied," Nick admitted with a chuckle. "Maybe there isn't *always* a choice."

"Smartass."

"Blame it on the company I keep." He kissed Natalie's forehead and nodded to the rest of the assemblage before disappearing into the bedroom.

Chapter 6

The room was crowded and confused, the darkness punctuated by fast-moving colored lights that only made it harder to make out the features of any of the dancers. Willow's original assumption, that she was in the Bronze on a particularly nerve-assaulting night, was discarded a few seconds later as she looked around. This place was much smaller, the air thicker, and what she could make out of the decor was more sophisticated than the thrift-store veneer laid over the warehouse interior of Sunnydale's thriving teen nightclub.

Someone jostled her from behind, pushing her through a curtain of chains onto the dance floor. A second before she would have sworn there was not an inch of space there, but a Willow-sized opening appeared just as she stumbled into it. Regaining her balance, she turned back the way she had come, only the find the space closed and closing in on her. The harder she tried to reach the chains marking the boundary of the dance floor, the further away they seemed. Drums and guitar pounded at her skull, and the random movement of the bodies around her seemed to focus itself on deliberately herding her deeper into the crowd.

A hand reached out of somewhere and grabbed hers, twirling her several revolutions in a gesture that would have been playful if she had known—or at least been able to clearly see—her impromptu partner. Just as abruptly the stranger let her go, leaving her stripped of whatever sense of direction she had thought she had. She couldn't see the chains any more, couldn't see anything but spinning lights and a restless crowd whose features she couldn't catch, a faceless mass moving in time to the relentless tune. Dizziness pulled the rug out from under her equilibrium, only the press of the crowd around her keeping her upright—there was simply no room to fall.

Just as she thought she would pass out on her feet, the song ended with sledgehammer abruptness, replaced by a sinuous slow tune. Like magic the crowd thinned, those who remained pairing off into their own little worlds in the softer lighting. Relieved, Willow drew several deep breaths into her grateful lungs, the frantic hammering of her heart calming its assault on her rib cage. She could see the chains now, she could get there...

Where had Xander come from?

He stood in her path, calm and smiling, the most welcome sight she could ever remember. "Willow. I've been waiting for you."

"Xander!" Heedless of her mood-shattering volume, of the many eyes around them, she flung herself across the few feet between them and hugged him tightly. Then she stepped back, casting a nervous glance around. "What's going on? What are you doing here? What am I doing here? Where *is* here?"

From anyone else, the low chuckle might have been mocking; but the warmth of it held the comfort of their long friendship, their unspoken promise to defend one another against the harsher side of adolescent life. When Xander laughed at her, it was because he understood. "It's a dance, silly."

Stepping toward her and taking her hand, he added, "Would you like to dance?"

She had a dozen more questions, but they all melted into meaninglessness in the heat of his smile. "I...uh-huh. Dance. Uh-huh."

He laughed again, deep in his throat in a way she was sure she had never heard before. In way that, along with the weight of his eyes on hers, was rapidly turning her insides into a hopeless puddle of goo. Placing her hand on his shoulder, he took up the other and held it to the side in a demure ball-room-type dance hold ("my dance space, your dance space" her mind quoted), his free hand placed quite properly in the center of her back, radiating his warmth right through her. Dizzy again, but this time she didn't mind. Certainly she was in no danger of falling. Did he have any clue what he was doing to her?

His smile widened, his gaze still intense on hers. He knew, all right. Willow could feel the furious blush heating her cheeks—though she was already pretty warm all the way through, thanks much—and quickly looked down, hoping irrationally that he hadn't seen. She thought that would be the end of it, thought he would take it as the signal to retreat over this line they had unexpectedly crossed, to suddenly plead clumsiness or thirst and bound cheerfully off the dance floor in search of any group involving more than two.

Instead he pulled her closer, his hand sliding from the safe zone above her waist to the small of her back, his other hand drawing hers into the minuscule space between her shoulder and his chest. Scant centimeters between them now, where there was any space between them at all. She found herself leaning back slightly and a little awkwardly, the only other option—an incredibly tempting one—being to just rest her head against his shoulder and hand over the steering wheel entirely.

Almost as if he'd read her mind, Xander let go of her hand, tracing light fingers along her arm, over her shoulder, up under her hair. Everything tingled and the world spun; she didn't even realize she had given in to the impulse until she felt his heartbeat against her cheek. Something deep inside her vibrated in response to each beat, matching the subtle bass line and muted percussion that flowed around and through them. She closed her eyes and sighed happily, effortlessly following him as they swayed in perfect rhythm. She had no idea where he had learned to dance like this, and she certainly didn't care. Staying right here forever would be just fine.

As any remaining scrap of tension or resistance drained from her neck and shoulders, he buried his fingers in her hair, then drew them slowly through its full length and down her spine to rest just above his other hand. For a few long moments they danced that way, two beings with one will, drifting in the sensuous tide of the music. Then Xander leaned his head down, his breath warm at her ear, and asked softly, "Do you know what an idiot I am?"

Too comfortable to even open her eyes, Willow mumbled, "What do you mean?"

Drawing back just far enough that she could see him when he tilted her face up to him, he responded, "Do you have any idea how beautiful you are?"

She had passed overwhelmed quite a while back; all she could do was blink at him. "Xander..."

"Don't say it." He dropped his voice to the point that she should barely hear him, but every word was clear. "Don't say anything."

She had imagined this kiss a thousand times, and it was exactly what she had imagined, only real. She hadn't thought she could melt any more than she already was, hadn't believed there was a nerve left anywhere in her that wasn't buzzing on overload. She'd been wrong. So wrong.

This was wrong.

A pinprick pain inside her lower lip, almost lost in the whirlpool of emotion and sensation. Taste of salt and rust. Taste of blood. She'd been had...and now he had her.

Her head was still spinning as she shoved him away, but it wasn't such a nice ride any more. Low chuckle, mockery of Xander's laugh, mockery of her. "Sweet Willow, sweet Watcher-child," Marcel singsonged. "All for me...but now you know the sweets in store for you."

† † †

"Willow, wake up!" Buffy shook her friend carefully by her good shoulder, hoping that rule about not waking sleepwalkers didn't apply to sleep-fist-clenchers-and-hyperventilators. This was just Not Good.

"Wha? Huh? Whassamatter?" Willow woke abruptly, blinking and disoriented. "Buffy? Wh-what is it?"

"You tell me. I'm not sure how you didn't tear the sheet in half; what were you dreaming about?"

Willow frowned, her eyes clouded with confusion. "Dreaming? I don't know. I don't remember dreaming." She thought a second, then added, "I must have been, though. Feel like I've been on the Demon Drop. Major adrenaline rush."

Not liking this, but not seeing anything to be done about it, Buffy shrugged. "Sounds like the kind you don't want to remember anyway. Looks like you're done with the nap for now, though; shall we start working on that stack o' videos?"

† † †

"Okay, so tomorrow's Terror Tourist agenda is the Science Centre in the morning, then we hit the University." Buffy ticked off the plans on her fingers. "Bloor runs by campus, so we can do lunch at that Future Café place Tracy was raving about. Unless we're still at the Science Centre at lunchtime, which is entirely possible if it's as huge and cool as Natalie says it is. Then we can just hit the cafeteria there..." Willow was clearly no longer listening, her attention turned to the window and the dusk outside with a puzzled frown. "Or we could blow all that off and hop on the next shuttle to Venus. That might be fun."

"Whatever," Willow replied absently. "Where is that coming from?"

"Okay, now you're spooking me. Where's what coming from?"

"The music."

Incredibly helpful response, considering Buffy heard nothing. She opened her mouth to say so, but by the time it would have come out the other girl was halfway across the room to the window. "Don't do this to me. We need you in this dimension."

"Where are you?" She didn't seem to be speaking to Buffy, though there was no one else in the room. "No. I can't see anything."

Nor could Buffy when she joined her friend at the window. "There's nothing there, Wil. Who are you talking to?" She raised her voice a notch. "Willow?"

"Something wrong?" Nick asked from the doorway.

"No clue. She said something about music, and then totally stopped making sense."

"Willow, you okay?" He crossed the room and tried to turn her away from the window, but she

shook his hand from her shoulder.

Buffy was liking the scene less by the microsecond. "What's up with this?"

The subtle change in Nick was something she could never adequately describe. Though even his eyes remained blue, he was suddenly more alien than any sewer vamp in all its demonic glory. "Willow." This was light-years from the lullaby voice of the previous night; this was pure power, pure command, filling the room with no need for excessive volume. "Look at me." She obliged for a second or two, then started to turn back to the window. "No. Look at me."

She wavered, but her eyes remained locked on Nick's. "But the music..."

"What did he do to you, Willow?" Nick's tone was only a hair less stern. "What didn't you tell us?"

"He...I...leave me alone!" She turned back to the window, pressing her forehead against it. "I don't have to listen to you. I don't!"

"What is *wrong* with her?" Buffy whispered anxiously.

Without answering, Nick took Willow by the chin and forced her to face him again. "That's right, fight me. I *dare* you. You kick me right out of your head and you keep me out!"

Giles picked that moment to knock at the apartment door, and Buffy dashed to admit him. Tipped off by her expression, he peered around her into the living room. "What's going on here?"

"My best guess? Nick and Marcel are playing tug-of-war with her brain."

Willow was still struggling to return to the window, and Nick pressed, "Come on, Willow! If you can fight me, you can fight him." She stopped trying to pull away, and he released her chin. "There's always a choice. Don't let anybody make it for you."

She stared at him a moment longer, then turned abruptly to the window. "I'm not listening. I listen to my friends. Buffy's one of them. So is Nick. And you're not. So *go away*." With that, she yanked the drapes closed and turned back to her friends, pale but clear-eyed. "Wow. My head really, really hurts."

Giles was at her side as fast as humanly possible, rather obviously placing himself between her and Nick. "Come sit down, Willow. Buffy, get her a glass of water, please."

"I'm on it." And she was, in and out of the kitchen before she could miss too much of the conversation.

"...understand it," Nick was saying as she entered. He seemed so perfectly normal, so human, Buffy could barely picture the way he had been a few minutes before. Which face was the truth? "Influencing a mortal from a distance...that shouldn't happen. Certainly it was out of Marcel's league last time I saw him."

"Which was when?" Giles asked.

Nick shook his head. "Almost two hundred years ago. Nobody's heard much from him since then, after he got involved with Lothos and that demon cult of his."

In spite of Giles' renewed suspicions—he was still obliquely shielding Willow from the blond vampire—his curiosity was piqued by the statement. "You refer to a cult. Do I take that to mean you're not alone in your view of the sort of vampire with which we are familiar?"

"Hardly." Nick laughed shortly. "I don't know anyone—except Marcel—who doesn't think they're a bunch of crackpots. They believe we've become too human, too removed from some sort of ancient demonic legacy. There are only rumors, really; they won't have anything to do with the rest of us unless they think they can convert someone to their way of thinking. As I understand it, they try to reach a 'pure' demonic state. They claim to have found incredibly ancient master vampires and

regained powers we've supposedly lost. But we've seen no evidence of that; all we've seen is that they choose to live like animals in the sewers and forgotten places. Some say that's all they really are now, animals. Some won't acknowledge them as vampires at all."

Giles pushed his glasses up. "In a way, the 'animal' judgment is correct, according to all the knowledge at my disposal. But they may know more than you think they do."

Nick shrugged. "Buffy told me about the legends, that vampires were created by the mixing of demon and human blood. I've heard similar ideas, though usually a little more watered down. If that's what the demon cultists believe, it explains a lot. We've always dismissed them as aberrations; maybe they really are more than that."

"A great deal more," Giles told him solemnly. "One of the ancient ones you mentioned has been trapped beneath Sunnydale for some sixty years, and his efforts to escape and to reclaim this world for demonkind are no rumor."

Buffy had been listening intently to all of this, synthesizing her own theory from the varying bits of information. "Lothos!" she burst out suddenly, startling both men and the slightly overwhelmed Willow. "Don't you see, Giles, that's why he was different from the rest of the L.A. fang gang!"

"I beg your pardon?"

"Remember how I told you he never got all fright-faced, even when he *totally* wigged? And he could do different things. Like fly. The others were all sewer vamps to start with, like the Master and his minions."

Headache and all, Willow caught on immediately. "But Lothos was the other kind, or he used to be before joining up with the Master. So that means Marcel is like Lothos."

"Bingo. Former society vamp, now sewer vamp wannabe. Probably learned all kinds of ritual weirdness from the Master that the society vamps aren't interested in. And that's how he can play with people's heads long-distance. Like how Lothos used to get into my dreams, and the Master does now."

"Dreams?" Willow managed to somehow jump to attention while remaining seated on the couch. "That's it, Buffy—the dream I couldn't remember this afternoon! It was about Marcel, and that same music was playing."

Giles frowned. "The theory has a certain merit, but the Slayer's dreams are a manifestation of her mystic link to the creatures she is destined to destroy. It's part of what sets her apart from the rest of humanity. For Marcel to affect another in that way, it would be necessary for him to create a similar link with her."

"Okay, so that's what we're dealing with." Buffy was starting to be *really* scorched at Marcel. "So we break this link thing, and he can't mess with her head any more, right?"

"Well, at the simplest level, that's correct," the Watcher replied, mental wheels visibly turning like crazy. "But we would first need to know how such a link was forged, and I admit that's where I find myself baffled. Willow would have to be present for any binding ritual of that nature, and there simply wasn't time."

"Maybe he stole a lock of my hair or something?" Willow suggested doubtfully.

Shaking his head, Giles replied, "I can't be entirely certain without access to my references, of course; but that sort of sympathetic magic seems insufficient to explain what happened to you this evening. Nothing he could take from you except...oh. Oh, dear."

Buffy definitely did not like the sound of that. "What?" she prompted. "What could he take?"

Nick seemed to have been left in the dust by the subject matter several minutes before, but now he caught up. "She wasn't bitten. Nat made sure of that when she checked her over. He can't have fed

from her."

"Maybe 'can't' is a little strong." Willow wiped a hand across her mouth, looking vaguely ill. "I remember now. When he kissed me...I remember tasting blood."

"Ew. That is *so* cheating!" Furious, Buffy sprang to her feet. "Sorry, Nick, but my vacation just got cut short. I'm going to find him, and I'm going to kill him."

"Buffy, wait!" Nick caught her arm as she headed for her bags.

"Wait for what?" she shot back. "For Marcel to catch her off-guard again? For someone else I care about to die because of me? I don't think so."

He wouldn't let go. "Go off half-cocked like this and it's you who's going to die. What good will that do Willow or anyone else?"

Yanking herself free, she glared at him. "Thanks for the vote of confidence."

She stalked over to her luggage and started pulling out stakes and accessories, and Nick was right behind her. "Use your head, will you? If you do manage to find him, he's going to see you coming a mile off. And even if you succeed in killing him, you're going to start a war. Do you realize what that means?"

"I should," Buffy returned. "I've been in the middle of one since the first day I found out I was the Slayer. Same old same old."

"Is it really? Do you plan to finish this war of yours in the next three days? Or are you going to go back to California and forget about it? Because I *live* here. Natalie lives here." At this she stopped rummaging and looked up at him. "Buffy, I understand how you feel, probably better than anyone else in this room. But I also understand the vampire Community in Toronto. You don't. And if you start a war, and leave us to finish it, we will lose. Is your revenge worth that?"

"Of course not." She shoved down her anger, her hatred of Marcel, tying it into a hard little knot that sat uncomfortably in the pit of her stomach. No fun, but at least it was safely clear of her brain. "But there's already a war, and he started it. I don't want you to have to clean up my mess, and I definitely don't want anything to happen to Natalie because of it. But I'm *not* leaving him alive. I'm the Slayer, and I'm Willow's friend. And I am going to kill him. So I guess you'd better start telling me how to be smart about it."

There was silence for a few moments, then Willow spoke up, "Buffy, maybe we should just be careful the next few days and then go home..."

"No," Buffy and Nick declared in stereo. Surprised, Buffy asked him, "You have a plan?"

"I have an idea," Nick allowed. "Just...let me find some things out first. Agreed?"

"Agreed," Buffy sighed.

"Good." Turning to include Giles and Willow, he went on, "I don't want either of you girls out after dark for now. And Willow is not to be left alone at *any* time."

"Very wise precautions," Giles agreed, turning a meaningful look on Buffy. "Willow, perhaps you could use Dr. Lambert's computer to assist me. I have some research of my own to add to Mr. Knight's."

"Okay." Nick nodded. "I'll stop by the morgue and let Nat know what's up. Remember: you two *stay here*."

Chapter 7

"Fancy meeting you here." Nick's light tone concealed little of the hostility he felt toward the youthful-looking vampire seated at the end of the bar. The Raven was crowded as ever tonight, and no one but Marcel was likely to even hear him. "We talk. Now."

Marcel took a leisurely sip from his glass before responding, "Why bother? I know what you're going to say." When the elder vampire continued to glare at him, he set the glass down on the bar, flashing a rakish smile. "Oh, all right. For old times' sake."

Nick allowed Marcel to precede him into the back room, then yanked the curtain across the door behind him. "You've made a big mistake this time."

"No, wait, Nicholas, let me." He crossed his arms in imitation of Nick's stance. "Willow is under my protection, Marcel. Let her go or you'll regret it.' How'd I do?"

"You'll regret it, all right. And the rest of us with you. Did you get the Community's approval before stirring up this hornet's nest?"

Marcel just laughed. "The Slayer? I'd hardly call that little thing a hornet. She'll be dessert for the Master before she can vote. As for the Community...you can all go into the sun for all I care. The weak deserve no better."

Nick grabbed him by the shoulders, slammed him up against the wall. "You don't get it, do you? It's probably too late for releasing Willow; Buffy will stop at nothing short of your death now, no matter what. But I'd recommend it anyway. Maybe she'll tear you into a few less pieces when she tracks you down. *After* you take this thing back to California where it belongs. Or better yet, give it up entirely."

"You haven't changed, Nicholas," Marcel scoffed. "Can't see anything but the obvious."

This wasn't working. Nick let the younger vampire go. "But you have. What do you see in their ways?"

The fire in Marcel's eyes was that of a fanatic. "What we are meant to be. What the world is meant to be. And I hold the key to bringing that destiny to pass."

"You're insane."

"No, Nicholas. I'm winning. I always win. And if you want to have a place in the world when it belongs to us, you'll side with me this time."

"You know I can't do that."

Marcel laughed shortly. "Yes, I suppose I do." He headed for the door, and Nick let him pass, finding nothing else to say. "Willow is mine," he tossed over his shoulder. "Don't try to interfere."

"What part is she in this 'destiny'?" But Marcel was already gone. Nick rushed through the door after him, scanning the crowd.

"He isn't worth the trouble, Nicholas." LaCroix followed Nick's line of sight toward the exit, where Marcel was already taking his leave. "And he won't listen to you in any case."

Nick nodded. "I know. And he's a fool for it."

"We've known he was a fool for centuries. That's hardly news. All he cares about are his petty games. Speaking of which...has he had his way with the Slayer's little playmate yet? I suppose that's why you're here."

"You're a fine one to talk about games," Nick muttered. "But I don't think this one is the same old pettiness. He has a purpose here, LaCroix, a big one. Terrorizing Willow is just part of it."

LaCroix shrugged. "He's hunting the Slayer, that's all. The other girl is merely a diversion in that process. Not much of one, I would imagine."

"Enough that he's still spending a lot of energy and attention to make her life hell." This earned a look of mild interest from his master, and Nick continued, "He's taken blood from her, bound her to him. I don't know what he's up to, but he's putting us all in danger."

Considering this, LaCroix commented, "I suppose that might make the Slayer a bit upset. Which is probably the point."

"Maybe. I don't think it's the whole point. But it certainly is one result." He recalled the black rage looking out of Buffy's little-girl face, a killing rage as dangerous as any vampire's. "She was willing to live and let live during this trip. Now she's ready to tear the city apart to get to him. And there's no doubt in my mind that she can do it."

"Then it's time she was stopped."

Ignoring the chill this sent through him, Nick pressed on, "At the cost of how many lives, how much damage? I've seen what she can do, LaCroix. You might be able to take her, but she'll destroy half the Community in the process."

If this prospect disturbed the eldest of that Community, he didn't let it show. "And you have an alternative to propose?"

"All she wants is Marcel. She has a valid claim to vengeance for what he's done to Willow. She has the right to demand justice on behalf of an innocent under her protection."

LaCroix's brows shot up. "Trial by combat? Don't be ridiculous. She's a mortal child."

"She's a Slayer," Nick corrected. "Granting her this courtesy could avert a war. Or is that what you want?"

The other made a show of considering a moment before replying, "No, I think not. Very well, Nicholas. She will have her single combat...under *my* arbitration. Tell her I will get word to her soon, and she is to take no action against *any* vampire until she receives that word, or the courtesy is withdrawn—and her pretty head will be the most sought-after prize in Canada. Understood?"

"Understood." Nick only hoped Buffy would understand too.

† † †

When the music started this time, Willow knew she didn't want to be here. Too dark, the dance floor lights too crazy, and somewhere in the press of moving figures she knew he was waiting, watching her. Just like before, she couldn't seem to catch a look at any of the faces. They were all just swirls of shadow...except one.

He wore his own face now, instead of hiding behind Xander's. So the rules of the game had changed again. Well, she didn't want to play any more.

The crowd let her pass easily as she walked to the center of the floor, and Marcel's face lit up with a charming smile as she approached. "Willow. I've been waiting for you."

"I know." She stopped several feet short of him, fists clenched at her sides.

Did his smile falter just a fraction? "Would you like to dance?"

"No." She fought to keep the lump in her throat from telling in her voice. She could do this. "I would like you to leave me alone."

"Are you sure?" He took a step toward her. Was she holding her ground or just rooted to the spot? "Tell me the truth. Isn't it just a little exciting to be the center of attention? Won't you miss me, even the tiniest bit?"

"No." Willow knew she had her vulnerabilities, but his absolute confidence was insulting. She wasn't *that* much of a pushover! "Buffy's going to kill you," she blurted as he advanced another step on her. "And I won't miss you at all!"

His wounded expression was so phony she wanted to knock it right off his face. "Well, if that's how you really feel about it..."

"It is."

"Then why should the Slayer have the honor?" Producing a wooden stake seemingly from thin air, Marcel held it out to her. "If you hate me so much...then I've lost. Go ahead. I won't stop you."

Willow made no move. "I don't believe you."

"What have you got to lose? I can take you whenever I want. I can hide inside your mind and haunt your dreams." He was inches away now, pressing the stake into her hand. "I've tasted your sweet blood once already. I can't wait to take the rest. The Slayer isn't here. Nicholas isn't here. There's no one to save you. You belong to me."

He ran his fingers back through her hair, then gripped it tight at the back of her head, forcing her to turn it to one side and expose her throat. "*No!*" She clutched at the stake, fully expecting it to be snatched out of her hands. But it was there, solid and sure. Blindly, desperately, she shoved the point into Marcel's chest.

She felt his fangs just graze past her skin as he fell, a look of frozen surprise on his face for the second before he hit the floor and lay still. It was several seconds before Willow registered what was wrong with this picture: he was still there. Every other vampire she'd seen killed had disintegrated on impact with whatever surface it happened to hit. But Marcel just lay there, the stake poking ridiculously up from his heart. Dead.

It was all just hitting the point of being real enough to warrant throwing up—or better yet, passing out—when a soft voice and a tickle of breath over her shoulder sent her instead into sheer paralysis. "Do you see now, Watcher-child? The thrill of the kill, what you could be? Can you ever be truly content to sit among your musty books and watch the Slayer have all the fun?"

Willow was about to demand what was so fun about it when her panicked mind made the connection that if Marcel was standing behind her he couldn't be dead on the floor in front of her. She hadn't killed him at all. "It's all just another trick!" she accused, whirling on him. "None of this is real."

He just smiled at her, deep blue eyes sparkling with unvoiced laughter. "You're mine, Watcher-child. Your reality is, and forever will be, what I make it." As he spoke, she tasted the salt tang of blood in her mouth again, but this time something told her it wasn't her own. "*You* will be what I make you. And you'll love me for it, and leave the Slayer and her circle of fools behind forever."

She was going to be violently sick all over the nice tile floor. "Why does every creepy thing I meet have to start talking about love?" she muttered, turning to make the attempt at running.

She stopped cold before she'd taken a single true step, eyes widening at the sight of the body

on the floor. There was no stake now, but twin trickles of blood marked the punctured throat. And the face belonged not to Marcel but to—

"*Xander!!*" Willow hurtled into wakefulness, still desperate to run but uncertain for a second where she was. "Oh, no, oh, no, oh, no, oh—"

"Willow! Hey, chill, girl, it's okay!" Buffy took her firmly by the arm, preventing her from flinging herself to the floor in a tangle of bedclothes. "Another nightmare, huh?"

"Oh, Buffy, it was horrible! He—and I—and he—" An echo lingered of the nauseating taste of blood. "Ohhhh...please tell me Xander's okay!"

Buffy's expression was equal parts concern and confusion. "Why Xander? He's back home, remember? Giles, tell her," she added as the Watcher hurriedly emerged from the bathroom.

"Uh, yes, of course," Giles agreed, resuming his place in the chair at Willow's side. "The only danger he was in when I left him yesterday was death by boredom." Peering intently at her, he asked, "Was Xander involved in this latest nightmare?"

"Both of them. The first time, I thought it was Xander but it was Marcel. This time..." Willow gulped. "I killed him. Well, not exactly, because it was supposed to be Marcel, but then everything changed, and Xander was lying there like he'd been killed by a vampire. But *I* killed him!" With a shiver, she recalled Marcel's taunting words. "He said I belong to him. Marcel, I mean. I think he wants to make me a vampire."

"Well, that is *not* on the program!" Buffy assured her. "And you don't belong to anybody but you."

"Indeed not," Giles agreed. "And he will not be allowed to take you away from your friends."

"We're gonna stop him, Wil," Buffy vowed. "Just let him try to get past us!"

"He already is," Willow reminded her miserably. "I'm scared, Buffy. Now I'm even scared to sleep." She huddled against the back of the couch, hugging her knees. "I want to talk to Xander. I know he's safe at home, but I think maybe I'll feel better if I hear it for myself."

"It is three hours earlier there," Giles pointed out. "Midnight is...well, it's not *too* unreasonable a time to call during a school holiday."

"He's up." Of that much, Willow had no doubt. "He's watching all his videos that his mom hates while she's asleep and he can get to the VCR."

Picking up the phone, Buffy punched in Xander's number without hesitation. "Good. So it's a plan." There was an interminable pause, then she hit the hang-up button. "Huh. No answer. He must be at the Bronze or something."

Willow shook her head. "Not this late. Not by himself. Unless...oh. Maybe he's not by himself."

Buffy opened her mouth to say something, but Giles spoke up first. "As unlikely as it sounds, we may wish to try the library. He was assisting me earlier this week in cataloguing some new arrivals. If he were desperate enough for an activity to pursue...well, it is a possibility, however remote."

Buffy and Willow exchanged a look, then Buffy shrugged. "Stranger things have happened. The library it is."

This time she held the phone out to Willow after dialing. It rang twice, then sure enough, Xander picked up. "Sunnydale High School Library and Sanitarium."

Xander's voice, alive and whole; Willow felt 100% better right away. "Hi! Haven't you escaped yet?"

"Willow? No way!" She could just imagine the shocked expression that went with that tone

of voice, and smiled at the image. "We were just talking... That is, I was just... Are you all right?"

That was weird; she had expected to be the one hiding something in the conversation. "I'm...yeah. I'm good. Great. Fine. Now."

"Now. That would be, as opposed to when?"

Nobody had said anything about hiding it *well*. "Oh. When? Oh. Um, before I called you. Because...because you weren't home. Yeah. Why aren't you home in the middle of the night?"

There was just a bit of a pause before he answered, "Because, um... Well, you know me, just can't stay away from the books..." They all really had to learn to be better liars one of these days. Xander didn't even sound like he expected to be believed. "I was just finishing a couple of things, you know... Wait a minute! I'm tired of people changing the subject. What's going on up there? Is Buffy all right?"

Willow blinked, thinking a second. Yes, she could answer this one truthfully, at least. "Sure. Buffy's fine."

"Oh. Well. Good. Buffy's fine, you're fine, everyone's fine. And in Toronto. Without me." Much to her amusement, he was pouting again.

"Oh. Poor baby," she teased. "All alone with the scary books. Finding anything interesting?"

Another pause, even shorter this time. "Not really. You know, same ol', same ol'." Which, in Sunnydale, could mean anything. "How's Canada?"

"North." Willow winced at her own lame attempt at humor, quickly adding, "Toronto's pretty cool. Buffy and I went shopping at this *very* major mall. It was a little scary."

"What can possibly be scary about a mall? Unless there were vampires there or something...." He laughed as she continued to speak at the same time.

"Not as scary as Queen West, though. Very weird people there." She managed to get the brakes on her tongue to let him talk just as he finished, but failed to hold back gales of giggles. "Okay. I'll answer you first. No, no vampires. At the mall. It's just *really* big. And crowded. And there's this cool PATH thing that goes under all of downtown, with more stores and things—"

She was babbling, she knew it; and Xander mercifully interrupted, "Underground? Doesn't Buffy get enough of that at home?"

"Yeah, but not with stores." More giggles. "Slaying vampires would be a lot more fun if they lived in this kind of underground."

"Well, sounds like you babes are having some major fun." Clearly pouting, he added again, "Without me."

Guilting, Willow tried to play it down. "Well, I don't know if it's *major* fun. It's, you know, a city."

"A city, huh? Been doing the club thing? You and Buffy meet any cool Canadian guys? As opposed to boring old Sunnydale guys?"

How on earth could she answer that one without him suspecting? *Meet* was hardly the word, and certainly not *cool*, but still... "No clubs. I don't know if there are any teen clubs. There are some cool cafés...but it's pretty much just been Buffy and me. It's not that there aren't guys. But I wouldn't say we've been meeting them." There. That should put off suspicion, right? Oh, there was one other non-lie she could add for veracity. Nick counted as cool. "Well, except for Buffy's cousin's sort-of-boyfriend. He took us to see *Phantom*. But he's older. And he's Natalie's. And...well, obviously he doesn't count." Oh, yeah. Even more babbling. Very not suspicious.

"Obviously." Xander sounded more than a little unconvinced. Which had a lot to do with the

fact that she was more than a little unconvincing. "Wil, are you sure everything's all right? I mean, no one's been slaying or biting or any bad-type things like that?"

A direct question. Now what could she say? Avoid answering at all, that was it. "Oh, come on. You're the one still on the Hellmouth. We're on vacation, remember?"

"Yeah, I remember." He wasn't buying. "Just wanted to be sure you and the Buff-ster do."

Mentally scrabbling for a way to keep him from pursuing the subject, she recalled that he had contributed a few suspicious elements to the conversation too. "So what about you? Is the Hellmouth cooperating with our vacation plans?" And just who was *we*? "I mean, it's Spring Break. You have to have *something* to do."

Now it was Xander's turn for odd pauses. "Oh, I'm... keeping busy. Helping at the gallery. Hanging at the Bronze." Apparently remembering where he was and what he at least ought to be doing there, he added, "Oh, and spending fun-filled hours staring at stacks of old books. Not too exciting."

"Well, too exciting is normal for us lately." Earlier this week Willow had held out hope that it might change while the Slayer was on vacation, but Xander's evasiveness was pretty much squashing that. "Maybe boring is a nice change...so why *are* you staring at stacks of old books at midnight?" She tried to make it sound casual, and failed miserably.

His patented deer-in-the-headlights face popped up in her mind's eye. "Midnight?

"It's three in the morning here," Willow explained patiently, a smile again pulling at the corners of her mouth. "That's midnight there. What's so interesting?"

"It's midnight?" He actually sounded like he hadn't realized it—which meant he definitely hadn't been spending the evening cataloguing books. He was excruciatingly aware of every second of that sort of work, and made sure everyone else was too. "Wow, how the time flies, you know, I had no idea it was that late."

She was trying to figure out how to call him on that, when another voice spoke in the background. "Go on, tell her about the grey guys."

Angel! Willow glanced over at Buffy as she placed the voice, unsure how to react. "What was that?"

"What was what?"

The sharp question had gained the Slayer's closer attention too, and Willow weighed that against Xander's urgent and utterly failed attempt at sounding innocent. He was hiding something all right—he was hiding *Angel*. Biting her lip, she decided he must have a reason; she just wished she knew what it was. "Oh. Just thought I heard something." She smiled weakly at Buffy and Giles, hoping they would chalk it up to post-nightmare jumpiness. "Noise on the line, I guess."

"Yeah, line noise. Long distance." His obvious relief that she had covered for him made her that much more curious, but if she pressed for more details she knew he'd do the same, and that would be bad. "So much for hearing that pin drop." The quip was punctuated with a nervous laugh, and she could have sworn she heard Angel snickering in the background.

Trying without success to picture the poker-faced vampire snickering, Willow agreed, "Yeah. Better call Candice Bergen and complain."

"First thing in the morning, promise." There was an awkward pause. They had reached a stalemate of sorts—each could tell something was up with the other, but neither could get away with demanding more details without having to give up their own.

Both broke the silence at the same time. "Okay, well, maybe you should get home and..."

"So, um, you better get some sleep up there; don't want to party *too* much...."

The second round of talking over each other prompted more nervous laughter on both ends. It *was* reassuring to hear his voice, even around whatever he was avoiding. "Yeah. Right. Need to get some sleep. Good idea. Um...it's good to talk to you."

"Good to talk to you, too." She expected a goodbye and a click, but instead he prompted, "Willow?"

"Yeah?"

"Be careful?"

A lump rose in her throat at his concern. "You too."

"And tell Buffy to keep you guys out of trouble?"

She glanced at Buffy, relieved at the opportunity to make any sort of joke. "Do I have to make that stick?"

"Well, you might want to give it a shot. Never know, you might get lucky."

"I might. That'd be a first, huh?" She was scraping the bottom of the barrel here; she really didn't want to let him go, but there was no denying the conversation was done.

"Oh, yeah." He tossed in a laugh, even though the joke had stopped being funny several answers ago. "Sleep tight, Wil. Don't let anything bite."

She couldn't help but gulp at this. "You too. See you later." If she said anything more, she was going to tell him everything, and decisively she hung up.

"Okay, what's up with him?" Buffy asked immediately. If Xander didn't want them to figure out whatever he didn't want them to figure out, it was definitely a good thing he hadn't asked to speak to her. Willow was acting suspiciously enough for both of them.

"I don't know," Willow answered. It was true enough. "He sounded like there was something going on, but if I asked him he'd make me tell what was up first, and I didn't want to tell what was up first. I mean, I guess I could, but I really couldn't, and—"

"Okay, okay," the Slayer chuckled. "I guess there were too many bad jokes for it to be *too* far from Standard Xander Procedure." Around a huge yawn, she added, "So, do you feel better?"

Nodding, Willow answered. "Yeah. Things feel a little more normal. Buffy, you should get some sleep. Why don't you go in Natalie's room? Giles can stay out here with me."

"You need sleep more than I do," Buffy admonished.

"I can't. Not yet, anyway. But that doesn't mean you have to stay up."

"She's right, Buffy," Giles seconded. "If you're to be prepared to fight Marcel, fatigue is hardly desirable. And as I had a nap this afternoon, and am less acclimated to the later time zone, it stands to reason that I should sit up with Willow while you rest."

"Well...okay. But you try, okay, Wil?"

"I promise. Good night, Buffy."

"G'night."

When she had closed the door of their hostess' bedroom, Willow turned to her remaining guardian. "Giles...I have something to ask you."

"Of course, if it is within my knowledge to answer."

"In the dreams...Marcel keeps calling me 'Watcher-child'. Do you know what that means?"

His startled expression gave her the answer before he spoke. "He said that? I shouldn't have thought...well. That does make some things a bit clearer."

"Makes what clearer? What does it mean, Giles?"

He took a deep breath before answering, "It means exactly what I'm sure you suspect it does.

Though I hadn't thought to tell you so soon; I only recently became certain myself. And I'm afraid this is hardly the, uh, most auspicious time for such a revelation. I am sorry for that." He laid a hand on her shoulder. "When the day comes that I am no longer able to perform the duties of a Watcher, that responsibility will fall to you."

"Me?" He was right, that was exactly what she had suspected. But hearing him actually say it... "But, Giles, I can't do what you do! I don't know all the demon lore, and I really don't know how to teach a Slayer to fight!"

"Nor do you have to," Giles assured her quickly. "Not yet. Not, I hope, for some years to come. By that time all the knowledge I possess will be yours, and more besides. You may well prove to be one of the most gifted Watchers ever to guide a Slayer."

"How do you know that?" Willow asked anxiously. "I mean, what if you pick me and I mess everything up?"

"You won't," Giles replied without hesitation. "It isn't simply a matter of my choosing someone, Willow. I couldn't choose someone else; the destiny is yours. That's why you were drawn to Buffy when she arrived in Sunnydale, why you feel compelled to aid her in spite of your own very natural and sensible fear. For each potential Slayer there is a Watcher, with the knowledge and intuition to understand the ways of vampires and demons and train the Slayer to stop them. For the generation to come, for a Slayer likely yet unborn...that Watcher will be you."

Willow gulped. "That means...I have to train the new Slayer after you...and after Buffy..."

"You will," Giles confirmed solemnly, rescuing her from having to finish the grim thought. "But as I said, not for some time yet. What concerns me now is that Marcel apparently knew you are destined to be a Watcher even before you did. Which is almost certainly why he is pursuing you."

"I thought he was just trying to get to Buffy."

"As did I. Exactly what he wanted us to think, no doubt. And I've been wasting my time trying to fathom his plans with the wrong goal fixed in mind." He glanced toward the bedroom door. "I'm sure he wishes to stop Buffy also, but the greater priority would be claiming you. The Slayer's power is useless without knowledge. He must be seeking to break that chain of knowledge."

A nasty thought occurred to Willow. "Doesn't that make you a target too? If you don't teach me, I can't teach the new Slayer. And Buffy still needs you too."

"True enough. But you are the most vulnerable link to the future. Without me, you would still have the library; and you already possess more knowledge than you believe you do. It would be unusual, but possible, to find other Watchers and ask their help. And Buffy, while her skills are not fully mature, has progressed far enough that she could continue honing them on her own if necessary, as well as teach them to you in order to pass them to the next Slayer."

"I'm going to learn all that fighting stuff?" Somehow the thought didn't seem as ludicrous as she expected it to, but still she ventured, "I'm really not sure I'm the best person for that..."

"You are the only person for it," Giles responded. "And don't sell yourself short; anyone who would take up a fire extinguisher against a powerful robotic demon has more than adequate instincts for the task. Remember, you will teach; it is the Slayer who will put those skills into practice."

"Right." Willow shuddered. "Assuming I live long enough to train her."

"Marcel mustn't be permitted to complete his plans," Giles agreed. "Not only because there are people who care for you—which is reason enough, of course. But while Slayers and Watchers alike often have rather short active careers, there is no record of ever losing one before he or she had a chance to begin. To break that chain would be disastrous, for us and for the future of the world."

"Future of the world?" The weight of that phrase settled uncomfortably on her shoulders. "Well, I guess that gives me a little more incentive to fight when Marcel tries to play with my head."

"You're not alone, Willow," he reminded her, squeezing her hand. "You mustn't ever think you're alone. Buffy is absolutely right; we won't allow him to take you. I have no intention of seeing you die before you've had a chance to live."

"Or turned into a vampire either." Buffy's voice from the doorway startled them both. "That's what he really has in mind, isn't it?"

"How long have you been, um, listening?" Giles asked.

"Long enough. You should have told her, Giles. And you should have told me."

He nodded acknowledgment of this. "Yes, well...I was waiting for the best time...but I, ah, suppose there is no best time for these things, is there?"

"I guess not." She still looked angry, but Willow figured the bulk of that was reserved for Marcel. "So if he did bring her across—that's what Nick calls it—what happens to her Watcherness? Would it just go away, or...?"

"Or would she become a vampire with the talents of a Watcher?" Giles finished for her. "I don't know. Watchers have been caught in that way in the past, of course; but their Slayers always...well, took care of them...immediately after." He watched the look the girls exchanged before continuing, "But Marcel's apparent intentions toward Willow would indicate that *he* believes she will retain her...Watcherness, as you term it."

"Otherwise he would have just killed me, right?" Willow couldn't believe she'd actually asked that question in a steady voice.

"That would seem the most efficient plan, yes. Identify a future Watcher when she has barely begun her education, eliminate her, and the chain of tradition is broken."

"Right. Got that much." Buffy nodded. "But make her an offer she can't refuse to join their little club, and...?"

Giles' expression had never been more grim. "And they gain control of her ability to recognize a Slayer in her very cradle."

"I can do that?"

"Yes. As I said, I'm sure it's at least part of the reason you and Buffy were drawn to one another as soon as she arrived, even though she was attempting to deny her calling."

"Okay, hold the phone," Buffy put in. "Marcel found Willow when she isn't a Watcher yet, and now you're saying he could use her to find Slayers when they aren't Slayers yet?" She whistled softly. "This is really, really bad."

"It is indeed. The powers that now oppose them would be in their hands to use for their own demonic ends." He looked from Buffy to Willow and back again. "It could allow them, after all these centuries of struggle, to reach their goal and reclaim the world for the Old Ones."

"All because I let the wrong boy lead me out of the theatre." The world felt tilted a little to the right, and Willow wondered if she was going to faint. "I never even got to try to count the dummies in the 'Masquerade' scene."

"You are *not* gonna start blaming yourself," Buffy told her firmly. "And we are *not* gonna let him get you. Okay?"

"Okay, I guess." Willow tried to think positive, but it wasn't very easy at the moment. "So what are we going to do now?"

"Kill Marcel." Buffy was all but bouncing with restless energy. "I guess we can't do anything

until Nick gets back from playing double agent, because I really don't know where to look for him. But the second I do...oh, no. If he knows about Willow, does that mean the Master does too? Is she still gonna be a target when we get home?"

"I don't know." Giles adjusted his glasses. "It may be that Marcel wishes to bring his prize to the Master only after he has won. To propose such an endeavour and then fail would be suicide...especially, I suspect, for an outsider attempting to earn the Master's favour. Knight spoke of him as a manipulator, a game-player. That is unlikely to have changed. However he came by his knowledge of Willow's calling, we can hope that knowledge will die with him."

Buffy nodded soberly. "And if it doesn't?"

"I don't think it would be that much of a change," Willow ventured. "I mean, I kind of attract more than my fair share of trouble already. Almost being a present for the Master was how I got into this in the first place, remember?" She shrugged, wincing as the movement jarred her sore shoulder. "I just need to swear off seizing the moment. At least until I learn to keep the moment from seizing me."

"Excellent point." It was good to hear Buffy laugh; it made the subject seem just a little less grim. "There's just been way too much seizing going on in general. It's got to stop."

"Absolutely. No more seizing allowed." It felt even better to laugh herself. "Except Marcel. Marcel definitely needs seizing."

"And it sounds as if the two of you need sleep," Giles opined dryly, though the smile tugging at the corner of his mouth gave him away.

Willow shook her head. "I still don't think I can. Soon, I promise. Buffy, you go back to Natalie's room. I want to read for a little while, get my mind off all this stuff as much as possible."

Buffy seemed about to protest, then thought better of it. "Okay. Sleep tight."

"You too."

Chapter 8

"Are you out of your mind?!" Natalie lowered her voice a notch, on the off-chance someone was still on this floor of the Coroner's Building. If they were, they had certainly heard that initial outburst. "This is your solution? Sending a sixteen-year-old girl into single combat with a vampire *you've* had trouble with? Oh, Nick, this one takes the cake."

"It's what she does, Nat," he reminded her solemnly. "I know you don't like it. But we're not going to be able to stop her. At least this way she fights *one* vampire. If she goes off on her own, she's sure to get herself killed."

"And you trust LaCroix to keep things honest? That's a load of crap and you know it!"

He ran a hand back through his hair. "I don't have any choice. He's the only one of us here who commands enough respect to arrange this. If Janette were still around..."

"And if she were speaking to you," Natalie added. "Which, after the events of her recent visit, I rather doubt."

Wincing, Nick conceded, "You're probably right. But she would do it for Willow's sake if not for mine. She wouldn't stand for seeing any young girl enslaved to Marcel; she has some...very strong opinions on that subject."

"Maybe she'd have the sense to deal with Marcel herself."

He stared at her a second, stung by the implicit challenge. "Do you really think Buffy would accept that? You didn't see her eyes, Nat. I did. She won't be satisfied with anything less than Marcel's destruction by her own hand." He caught Natalie's hand, kissed it, held it between his own. "If it were you in Willow's place, I would feel exactly the same. I can't usurp her right to fight for her friend. I won't."

Natalie was not the least bit mollified. "She's just a kid, Nick!"

"No. She isn't. She's the Slayer."

"Don't tell me you believe all that mumbo-jumbo!" She snatched her hand away from him. "All right, obviously she's special. Beating the snot out of legions of the undead without breaking a nail isn't exactly a standard grade ten cheerleader skill. I'm dying to get those tests finished and see what the hell is in her genetic structure. But she is still a kid. She worries about her hair and her grades and her clothes. She belongs at the mall and the big game and the prom. She's already afraid of losing all that to full-time vampire slaying; what do you think this is going to do to her?"

"What do you think it's doing to her already?" Nick returned. "What do you think it's doing to Willow? It's Marcel who's trying to take away their chance to be kids, Nat. And it's Buffy who has to take it back. It won't work if I try to do it for her."

"I still don't buy it." Natalie sighed in frustration. "But I have a feeling she's not going to listen any more than you are. And you're right about one thing: I can't stop her." Jabbing a finger at him, she went on, "You just better make damn sure LaCroix plays this thing straight. I hate the idea of

having him involved."

"No more than I do. But there isn't any choice."

"There's always a choice, Nick," she reminded him. "I just hope this isn't one we'll all regret."

† † †

"Giles!" Natalie dashed into the living room where the Englishman lay sprawled unconscious on the floor next to the hide-a-bed. "Nick, find the girls and get some ice. He's got a hell of a bump."

"Buffy? Willow?" Nick headed for the bedroom and nearly collided with the bleary-eyed Slayer.

"What's going on?" she asked, covering a yawn as she strode past him. "Giles? Is he okay?" Her eyes went wide as she noticed the empty hide-a-bed. "Ohmigod, where's Willow?"

Natalie looked up sharply, her expression matching Buffy's. "We were hoping she was with you." She turned her attention back to her unexpected patient, who was coming round with a groggy moan. "Nick. Ice?"

He jumped at the repeated request, keeping an ear on the proceedings while he was in the kitchen.

"Ohhh...what happened?"

"You got clobbered," Buffy replied succinctly. "And it looks like Willow got grabbed."

Nick returned in time to see Giles attempt to get to his feet at this news.

"Uh-uh," Natalie ordered, "give yourself a minute. We'll find her. Did you see anything?"

"Uh...no." He obediently held the ice pack on the back of his head when Natalie placed his hand there. "No, nothing. I was reading, Willow and Buffy were asleep...and then I was here on the floor just now."

The Slayer frowned. "I don't get it. None of us would invite him in...unless he made Willow do it somehow. But that shouldn't count." Turning questioningly to her Watcher, she continued, "It doesn't count, right?"

"What are you talking about?" Nick asked, confused. "That's just an old wives' tale."

"I guess the sewer vamps never got that memo. And can I just say I'm really *not* into certain differences in the rules here?" Buffy's fierce tone belied the flippant comment. "We biffed it, Giles. We *promised* her we wouldn't let Marcel get her!"

Nick heard her only peripherally, latching onto the echo of a familiar presence that didn't belong in this apartment. "It wasn't Marcel."

"LaCroix?" Natalie barely waited for his affirmative nod before continuing, "What the hell does he think he's doing, Nick?"

"Who's LaCroix?" Buffy asked. "And who made Willow top goodie in the treasure hunt?"

Nick held up his hands. "He's not on Marcel's side, Buffy; he's a neutral party. It may even be the safest place for her."

"Nobody's safe with him," Natalie grumbled.

Giles looked sharply up at her. "What do you mean, Dr. Lambert? Who is this...person?"

"Nick?" She sent the vampire a dark look. "Care to fill them in?"

With the trio of agitated mortals turning expectant attention on him, he had to cover a surge of doubt that this was really the best idea. "LaCroix is the most powerful vampire in the area. He's—

was—also my master, the one who brought me across." Quickly he related the significant particulars of his visit to the Raven and the resulting agreement to give Buffy a sanctioned shot at Marcel. "It's the only way a Slayer will be permitted to kill a vampire without interference or penalty. You're being granted the right to settle a personal vendetta as if you were one of us. It's the best I could do."

"It's good enough," the Slayer in question responded, "*if* it goes like you say. In which case, what does LaCroix want with Willow?" Before the question could be answered, there was a knock at the door. "More people? Natalie, when you said no parties at four in the morning, is this what you had in mind?"

"Ah...no." Getting up to answer the door, the doctor admonished Giles, "Stay right in this chair, and keep holding that ice pack." Everyone tried to look casual as she admitted the visitor, a blonde vampire waif in denim and lace. "Urs. Something I can do for you?"

"Hi, Dr. Lambert." She was more nervous than Nick had ever seen her, which was saying something. "I'm just playing courier. Is the, uh, Slayer here?"

"That would be me." Though the other girl had more than a century on her, Buffy's poise made her seem the elder. "What you're couriering wouldn't happen to have anything to do with Willow, would it?"

Hastily Urs assured her, "Your friend is fine, honest. He says he isn't going to hurt her, and he doesn't bother saying that very often, so...well, here." She held out a formal-looking grey envelope, pulling her hand back as soon as Buffy had it. "Okay, that's all I have to do with this, so—"

A brief giggle escaped the mortal girl's deadly serious demeanor at the messenger's obvious discomfiture. "I'm sorry. I shouldn't laugh at you. It's just...what did they tell you about me?"

"About you personally? Nothing."

Buffy nodded. "I guess that would be the worst. And I guess I kind of am the bogey-girl you've heard about. But right now the only vampire in Toronto who needs to be worrying about those scary bedtime stories coming true is Marcel." After a second's thought, she added, "You know, maybe you shouldn't spread that around."

Urs gave her a shy but distinctly conspiratorial grin. "Your reputation is safe with me."

"Good. I think." As Urs took her leave, Buffy muttered, "I'm gonna be *so* glad to get back to dealing with vampires I understand."

Nick and Giles hovered over Buffy's shoulders as she opened the envelope, and Natalie seemed about to join them, then instead turned to the departing vampire. "Urs? Can I talk to you a second? I have a favor to ask."

They stepped into the kitchen, and Buffy drew out an elegantly handwritten note. "Dear Miss Summers," she read:

> As I trust you are aware, Nicholas has negotiated on your behalf for an opportunity to legitimately settle your differences with Marcel. You will understand that extending such a courtesy to any mortal, even—especially—a Slayer, necessitates a certain level of formality to ensure that the Code of our kind is honored. Therefore you are expected to adhere to the following terms:
>
> You are to arrive at 43 Macon Street at 4:30 a.m., approximately one-half hour from the time you receive this letter. I believe Nicholas is familiar with the address, and can direct you there. You may carry no more than three weapons. You will enter

through the steel door on the southwest corner of the building. No one else may enter until the duel is completed.

No doubt you are aware by this time that I have what both you and Marcel want. Miss Rosenberg is my guest and will remain so until this conflict is resolved. It is in her best interests for all parties involved to abide by the terms I have set.

I look forward to meeting you.

Regards,
Lucien LaCroix

By now Natalie had shown Urs out and returned to the living room, and Buffy looked around at the three adults with calm determination. "Discussion is pretty much a waste of energy at this point. Let's go."

† † †

The knock at his office door came just at the time LaCroix expected it; thus far all was proceeding smoothly. "Come in."

"I delivered your letters," Urs told him without preamble. "Next time I'll know to worry about the weird vampire shooting the messenger, not the Slayer. *She* actually has a sense of honor."

"You seem well enough," LaCroix noted.

"I got out before he could do anything beyond throwing a lantern at me." She indicated an ugly burn mark on her right shin. "I'm counting my blessings and calling it a miss. I hope the Slayer does kill him; he's a lunatic."

"So it would appear. But the Slayer was more hospitable?"

Urs shrugged. "I guess she doesn't have to throw things to make her point."

An interesting response; LaCroix elected not to comment.

"I told you Buffy wouldn't do anything to her." The mortal girl's timid voice was a surprise; until now she had maintained a speak-when-spoken-to policy.

"As I recall, Miss Rosenberg, I didn't contradict you. I simply mentioned that the reputation of your friend's kind preceded her."

She seemed about to reply, but remained silent as he swiveled his chair to face her.

"Are you cold?" Urs asked abruptly, removing her denim jacket and offering it to the girl. "You look cold."

Cautiously she accepted the gesture, adding the jacket to her unplanned ensemble of nightshirt, leggings, and stocking feet. "Thank you."

"That will be all, Urs."

The young vampire needed no further prompting, pausing only long enough to flash the captive a sympathetic smile. Recognizing a kindred spirit, he supposed. Though the mortal girl—assuming she survived the night—seemed likely to develop a bit of self-confidence in considerably less than the century it had taken Javier Vachon's "innocent goddess." He had brushed up against her potential strength with the mental nudge that had kept her below the surface of sleep for the short flight

to the Raven. And though she had awakened screaming a few minutes later, she had since remained quite composed despite her unenviable situation. His assurance that she was in no danger from him so long as everyone played by the rules was, he knew, not terribly reassuring. But if her heart beat a little too fast, if a little too much white could be seen around her eyes, she was nonetheless several degrees the safe side of panic.

No thanks to Marcel. A day or two more of his incessant pushing and pulling would likely drive the child as mad as he was. Nicholas was right: the demon cultist's attitude was as much a threat as the Slayer and her intrepid little band. "So," he addressed his young guest, "shall we take our ringside seats for the main event?"

Chapter 9

"I hate this," Natalie informed everyone, glaring at the door designated for Buffy's entrance into the warehouse. Nick had identified it as the arena for an underground series of streetfighting tournaments that had recently been shut down in a rather ugly homicide bust. "I know you all know that already, but I just want to go on record that I *hate* this."

Nick sighed. "It is in keeping with LaCroix's sense of setting the scene. But it's also practical—a neutral location, and there shouldn't be any nasty surprises. It's just a big blank space with a concrete floor."

"Fine by me." Buffy fingered the comforting smoothness of the three-inch silver cross hanging just below the hollow of her throat, a gift from a guy who couldn't touch it himself unless he was in the mood for third-degree burns. What would Angel say, she wondered, if he were here now? "I want to get this over with, get Willow, and get home. I am *over* all this game-playing."

"Don't get overconfident either," Nick cautioned. "Just because Marcel prefers to play games doesn't mean he can't handle a straight fight when he has to."

Buffy nodded. "I missed him once. I don't plan to miss again." Turning to Giles, she straightened her shoulders. "Any words of wisdom before I go into the ring, coach?"

He wasn't exactly crying, but that British upper lip was not quite as stiff as it could be. Grasping her shoulders, he replied seriously, "Just come out alive and whole, and bring Willow with you. You both would be far too sorely missed."

"Thanks." She took a deep breath. "And this would be the proverbial Point of No Return. See you guys in a few!"

With that and a smile over her shoulder, she pulled open the door and strode through, hearing it slam shut behind her.

"Buffy!" Willow's voice snapped her attention to a low, iron-railed platform against the center of the wall to her left about fifty feet away. As her eyes adjusted to the light level—a shock after the darkness in the street—she saw her friend seated on a high wooden stool. Standing behind her, hands resting on her shoulders, was a tall stranger in a sharply-tailored black suit. LaCroix, from Nick's description. Automatically she headed for Willow.

"Not another step, Miss Summers." The voice was cultured and cool, but his bared fangs were suddenly a millimeter from Willow's neck; and Buffy stopped in her tracks. "Marcel will arrive any moment, and I will tell him the same: if either of you approaches this young lady before the winner is determined, your only prize will be her lifeless frame. Do I make myself clear?"

"Clear as Evian." When he stood straight and Willow let out her held breath, Buffy asked, "You okay, Wil?"

The other girl gulped, her voice wavering just a little as she replied, "I'm okay. Be careful, Buffy."

"You know it." Then she asked LaCroix, "So what happens if Marcel doesn't show?"

"Why, Slayer?" her opponent asked genially, stepping through a door at the opposite end of the cavernous room. "Are you afraid of me? I don't blame you." To the other vampire he added, "And yes, LaCroix, you make yourself quite clear. But I don't need to approach her...do I, Willow?"

He held out his hand, and Willow leaned toward him, about to climb off the stool except that LaCroix still held her shoulders and held her back, leaning to murmur something in her ear that Buffy couldn't hear. It wasn't hard to guess, though, when Willow stopped pushing against his restraining hands, her wide eyes clouding and then closing. She was out in seconds, with no apparent effort on this strange vampire's part; and Buffy wasn't sure whether she should be thankful or furious.

Marcel, however, had no trouble opting for the latter. "Arrogant old meddler! She's mine. You can't keep me out of her mind forever!"

"I don't need to," LaCroix returned levelly. "Only until either you or the Slayer emerges the victor."

The younger vampire turned his thundercloud glare on Buffy. "Then let's get on with it."

"First thing you've said that made sense," she replied, flipping a stake into the air and catching it in a perfectly balanced throwing grip.

"You will begin at *my* word," LaCroix snapped. "And that will not be until you reduce your arsenal to the quantity agreed upon, Miss Summers."

Buffy frowned at him. "You said three weapons. One small stake. One medium. One well-done. I went with simple and straightforward. Where's the breakdown?"

"Around your neck," the arbiter answered. "Hardly an innocent accessory."

"Oh." Her hand went to Angel's gift, and she knew she wouldn't trade it for any pointy stick, maybe not even for the crossbow she had fervently wished was not most of the continent away. Hopelessly sentimental, but true nonetheless. Besides, if she couldn't do this with two stakes, it wasn't going to happen with three. "Buffy goes 'duh.' Think fast."

Shifting her grip on the small stake, she tossed it underhand to LaCroix. Simultaneously she reached over her shoulder with her other hand, pulling from her knapsack a two-foot-long, viciously sharp hunk of hardwood as thick as her forearm. Nick had presented her with it from the trunk of his car; she had decided she didn't want to know what it was doing there. "Okay, ref. Where's that starting whistle?"

"By all means," LaCroix chuckled. "Keeping yourselves within this room but off this platform...you may destroy each other at will."

That was all Buffy needed. She'd meant what she said: she'd had it with games. This one was going down as directly as she could possibly manage.

She'd only been half-joking when she'd told Nick that this thing could almost do double-duty as a battering ram. Taking a firm grip on it with both hands, she used exactly that approach, barreling straight for him with the point leading the way. It didn't connect; after the arrow thing she didn't expect it to. He took one of the courses of action she *did* expect—pretty much the top of her preference list, in fact—stepping aside and seizing the stake as she went by, adding a good push to her momentum with the intention of sending her sailing on by with her steering pulled out of whack.

Well, he wasn't the only one who could play chicken. Her back popped like a string of firecrackers as snapped her legs up into a pike position, forcing her forward speed into centrifugal force in the last instant before he released the stake. Tucking into a back somersault, Buffy registered that she had ended up swinging a bit higher than she had initially calculated, and over-rotating in a major way.

That left her with two choices: come out of the tuck at the planned time and land flat on her back on the concrete floor, or pop out of it now and land in a graceless tangle on Marcel's head.

Muscles well-trained in how these things normally went protested strenuously when she chose the latter option, but they obeyed; and she managed to keep them loose enough to avoid serious injury as she and the vampire hit the floor in a tangle of arms and legs and one sharp pointy trapeze-substitute. She recovered as quickly as possible, straddling Marcel's chest with her knees pinning his arms, and clocking him across the jaw with the blunt end of the stake. "Now, see, you vamps keep me from a brilliant career in the circus," she noted breathlessly, raising the point over his heart.

"Really? Let's see." He sat up as if she weighed nothing at all, knocking her backwards and launching straight up, catching hold of her ankles on the way. "Does she fly through the air with the greatest of ease?"

*Oh, that's not **even** fair!* The sudden lurch broke her grip on the big stake, and it bounced off the floor, which was now about fifteen feet below where she dangled upside-down. "Brrrreeet! Foul!" Buffy called, reaching for her knapsack and the remaining stake. No battering ram, no wicked little secret-agent sleeve/boot number; it was just your run-of-the mill stake...but it would do the job. "It's the penalty box for you, buddy." Just as she got one side of the knapsack flap open, he jerked them across the room, shaking the stake out in the process. She barely caught it, ignoring the distinct impression that about half her brains had been rattled out of her head, and took a deep breath.

Drawing her knees to her chest helped, but her abs still screamed at being ordered to pull her upright enough to grab one of her captor's wrists with her free hand, digging her fingernails into the tendons and hoping like hell it would force him to let go of her foot.

It did. Pulling his arm aside to provide a critical few extra inches of maneuvering room, she slammed her heel into his chin, trying not to think about the fact that if she knocked him too silly they'd probably both go *splat.* They didn't, but it was enough to make him let go of her other foot; and Buffy dangled by one hand for a heartstopping split-second before wrapping her legs around his waist and gaining a somewhat firmer handhold on his shoulder. That meant both his arms were free, of course; but there wasn't much she could do about that except stake him before he could use them. It might cost her a broken bone or three when they hit the ground, but she figured it would be worth it.

Or it would have been if it happened that way. What did happen was blindingly fast, but she was quite sure it involved a couple of heavy-duty vises on her shoulders, a useless swipe with the stake, very unhappy hamstrings and a concrete floor coming at her *really* fast. Buffy rolled with the fall as much as possible—at least until she ran into the wall—counting a couple of distinctly uncomfortable *crunch*es but no nastybad *crack*s. She decided not to think about the injury topic right now, just climbed to her feet. "Hey, my contract didn't say anything about performing without a net!" she shouted at the hovering vampire.

He just grinned at her, crossing his arms and rising several feet further out of reach. "Well, what kind of brilliant career would that be?"

"I changed my mind," she informed him. "I'll keep the job I've got. So get your sorry butt down here and let me do it."

"As if *that's* going to happen."

"Worth a shot," the Slayer returned. "I mean, you're the one who said you had a rep to protect. You think it's not gonna be all over the grapevine that you pulled this Oz the Great and Terrible routine instead of getting your hands dirty?" She shrugged, turning in a circle as she surveyed the warehouse. "Not that it makes any difference to me, of course. I'm up for going into overtime. It's not like I have

to leave the room to get that big loading door open when the sun comes up, or..."

Directly above her like that, he made it all but impossible for her to tell where he was going to land. It seemed he was coming straight down on top of her; but then he was standing behind her, snapping the chain of her cross and flinging it yards away to their right. She whirled on him, hoping the turn against her previous momentum would be enough of a surprise to warrant the slight sacrifice of speed and power.

It wasn't. Neatly sidestepping the stake, he let it go by this time and instead caught Buffy by the throat, lifting her a foot off the floor. Lashing a kick at his knee, she tried to draw breath to make a suitable comment, only to find the breath wouldn't come. Oh, God, she couldn't breathe! The rush of adrenaline resulting from that realization was almost enough to power her way out of his grip, kicking wildly and pounding at his arm.

Almost, but not quite. "You're just using up your oxygen faster," Marcel told her through a swarm of purple spots. She thought she was still hitting him, but she wasn't sure. "But relax...maybe I won't kill you now. Maybe I'll reserve that pleasure for my Watcher-child. Let her feed first on the fire of Slayer blood, and she'll crave it forever."

His voice came from far away, and Buffy fought to assign meaning to the words. Something about Willow, something very bad. She had to save Willow. But her lungs were on fire, and the world was going dark.

Then she was lying in a heap on the cool concrete, drawing wonderful floods of air into her aching body. What had happened? She had been fighting a vampire...Marcel. Marcel had been strangling her.

Marcel was going to get Willow.

Hauling her eyes open, she grabbed the stake lying nearby where she had dropped it and pushed herself upright. Across the huge room, Marcel stood by the railed platform. LaCroix stepped back from Willow—how long had she been awake?—and Marcel took her hand as she slid off the stool to her feet. Swinging aside the gate in the railing, Marcel pulled Willow close to him, tucking her hair behind her shoulders and tilting her head to one side.

"Leave her alone!" In the back of her mind Buffy knew there was no way she could cross the impossible distance in time; but before that thought was fully formed she had done it anyway, shoving Marcel against the railing and plunging the stake into his heart in one movement. He hit the floor, bounced into a shower of dust motes; and it was over.

She could have sworn she caught a flash of open-mouthed shock on LaCroix's face before he returned to cool unreadability. Willow, on the other hand, was staring at her with eyes that seemed impossibly wide even for Willow. "We won, Wil. You can breathe now."

"Buffy, you...you...how did you *do* that?"

"How did I—ooh, whoa." The room was spinning, and she lurched against the railing. "Somebody stop the floor, please."

And then the world went dark again.

† † †

"It's taking too long."

"It's been less than ten minutes, Nat."

Giles looked at his watch. "Really? Good heavens, it seems like hours."

Nick set a sympathetic hand on the near-frantic Watcher's shoulder. "She can do it, Giles. Marcel can't cheat. They'll be okay."

"Assuming *LaCroix* doesn't cheat," Natalie put in.

"He has no reason to bother Buffy if she doesn't attack him," Nick reminded her. "And if he refers to Willow as his guest—"

"I was his guest once, remember?" she interrupted with a shudder.

Nick brushed his fingertips over her cheek, wishing he could wipe away the hurt in her eyes. Wishing he hadn't tried once before and succeeded only in damaging the trust between them. "You were something to take away from me. That's why this had to be Buffy's fight. For her he can and will be impartial."

Giles regarded him shrewdly. "But you arranged this...courtesy on Buffy's behalf. And in so doing quite likely placed yourself in a worse position with LaCroix than before."

"Probably." Nick shrugged. "It's been worse, it's been better. It'll be both again. That's for me to worry about."

"Perhaps. But we owe you a debt."

"No. I told you, the debt is mine. I could help Buffy and Willow a hundred times over and it wouldn't begin to tip those scales."

"Well, I've collected a few bones of my own to pick with LaCroix," Natalie muttered. "So you better be right about this, Nick, or so help me I'll—"

They never found out what she would do, for at that moment LaCroix himself emerged from the door Buffy had entered. "Good evening, Nicholas. Dr. Lambert. And Mr...Giles, isn't it? Or perhaps I should say good morning," he mused, glancing to the east where only a vampire's eyes could detect the lightening of the sky. "Oh, don't worry, the Slayer was victorious. And quite impressive; but she seems to have overtaxed herself. One of you gentlemen really ought to go and collect her; I doubt Miss Rosenberg's shoulder is ready for lifting a weight equal to her own." Before anyone could say anything, he took to the air and was gone.

Giles ran inside at almost the same instant, calling the girls' names.

"We're here, Giles!" Willow called back as he entered, Nick right behind him and Natalie bringing up the rear after grabbing her medical bag. "I'm fine. But Buffy's out cold."

"What happened?" Giles knelt beside them, putting his jacket over the ghost-pale Slayer, who lay motionless with her head in Willow's lap.

"I don't know. Marcel was about to bite me—I thought he'd killed her—but then she got up and..." Willow looked down in awe at her friend. "It was like you, Nick. She moved so fast I couldn't even see her. Then she fainted."

During this recitation Nick glanced over Buffy's neck, where there were no bites, but nasty strangulation marks were beginning to show. "It must have been sheer desperation. There was no other way to save you, so she just did it." He shook his head. "If you believe the legends, she can potentially do anything we can. But that takes an incredible amount of energy."

Natalie nodded. "Hypoglycemic shock," she declared, pulling a plastic bottle of clear gel from her bag. "First order of business is getting her blood sugar back up. If we can't bring her around, we'll have to get her on an I.V." Seating herself beside the unconscious girl, across from Giles, Natalie lightly tapped her cheeks. "Buffy? You need to wake up now."

"Unnnh?"

"That's it, kiddo. Talk to me. Can you open your eyes?"

"Dunno." Her voice was faint and a bit slurred. "'M tired."

"I know. But open your eyes for me anyway, okay? You can rest soon, I promise."

"'Kay." It took a second, but Buffy's eyes opened and looked in Natalie's general direction. "Whassup?"

The doctor smiled at her. "Well, apparently you did something pretty incredible, and completely wiped out your body in the process. Giles and I are going to help you sit up now, okay?"

"Uh-huh." She leaned heavily on both sets of arms on the way up, but balanced reasonably well once she got there. "Hi, Giles. So wha'd I do?"

"It seems, more or less," he replied, "that you, um...flew."

Buffy just blinked, clearly not connecting the concept to herself, if indeed she connected the word to the concept in the first place. "Huh?"

"Open your mouth, Buffy," Natalie instructed patiently, squeezing about a tablespoon of gel onto the girl's tongue when she complied. "Just let that melt and swallow when you need to. It's glucose. Do you know what that is?"

"Nope." She thought a second, then added, "Tastes sweet."

"That's right. It's the kind of sugar that you can digest fastest, the kind that gets carried in your blood to give your body energy."

"Sure. Whatever." Buffy swallowed, then looked around with a worried frown. "Where's Willow? Is Willow okay?"

"I'm right here, Buffy," Willow answered, scrambling around from behind her to sit next to Giles so Buffy could see her. "I'm fine."

"Okay, good." Swallowing again, she asked Giles, "What do you mean, I flew?"

"He means," Willow answered for him, "you got from there"—she pointed to the opposite wall, easily sixty feet away—"to here in less time than it took me to say it."

Buffy thought about this a second. "You mean like Nick?"

"Exactly like Nick," Natalie confirmed. "Except you're mortal, so your body doesn't work the same way Nick's does. So it took every ounce of energy you had."

"And I crashed."

"Crashed and burned."

"Can I have some more of that sugar stuff?"

"Absolutely," Natalie chuckled. "How do you feel now?"

"Um...okay, I guess." She accepted another dollop of glucose gel, and sat sucking thoughtfully at it. "The floor's still moving."

"Then we won't make you walk, how's that? We should get home now, though."

"I'll carry her," Giles piped up before Nick could do so.

"Get home?" Buffy repeated as he lifted her. "Where are we?"

Giles shot Natalie a worried look, and she smiled in response. "It's okay. She's just a little confused right now. Buffy, this is the place you fought Marcel, remember? And saved Willow."

"Oh. Yeah." She seemed not terribly concerned about the notion, and Nick wondered again how much the concept was actually connecting in her mind.

"What day is it, Buffy?" Natalie asked, walking next to Giles.

"Ummm...is it still Thursday?"

"Good enough. And how old are you?"

Buffy had to think a moment, but answered correctly, "Sixteen." She was fighting to keep her

target of his scheming was saying.

"Well, they've had, like, centuries to get good at it," Xander shrugged. "They're pretty cool little guys, once you get used to them."

"And when they're not pushing you into piles of heavy crates." Buffy still looked upset about that.

"I told you, that was an accident," Xander tried to reassure her. "They didn't mean for me to trip, and they were getting ready to try to dig me out of that mess when Fang Guy showed up and scared them off."

"Still...." Buffy frowned pensively into her drink, then visibly forced herself to cheer up. "Well, at least they saved the gallery, and Mom says the opening went really well, thanks to my nice friend Xander." She sent Xander a wicked sideways look. "I think my mom wants to start a fan club for you."

It was Xander's turn to blush, and Buffy and Willow laughed. "Face it, Xander," Willow smiled at him with an uncomfortable amount of adoration in her eyes. "You're a hero."

"Cut it out," he mumbled, trying to bury his face in his drink and highly aware that he was red enough to glow in the dark. "Let's just never do this again, okay?"

The girls smiled in rueful agreement, willing to let the teasing drop. "Deal," Buffy nodded. "From now on, we all get in trouble together. Or at least in the same city."

"Amen." They fell into a comfortable silence, content to listen to the music and be together. Willow's shoulder didn't seem to be bothering her; she used that arm to move her glass around on the table, leaving round water trails. Buffy played idly with the cross around her neck, the dim lights sending tiny reflections skittering off of it. Xander thought he could see something that looked terrifyingly like bruises around her neck, but didn't really want to know for sure.

Every once in a while, Buffy would look up, her eyes scanning the Bronze as they had about every ten seconds for the last half-hour. Xander knew who she was looking for, and was pretty sure where Angel was. He stayed quiet as Buffy's smile dimmed a little with each unsuccessful search, until he just couldn't take it any more.

"He's upstairs," he told her with a heavy sigh, breaking the silence so suddenly that Willow jumped, and gesturing to the platform above Buffy's head.

Buffy twisted instantly in her chair to look up, and spotted Angel standing behind the railing, still as a statue. Her smile spread across her face like sunlight, and Xander fought back bitter, unreasonable jealousy. Angel started towards the stairs, Buffy's eyes following him all the way, and Xander caught Willow looking at him sympathetically.

It only took a moment for the vampire to work his way to the table, since crowds seemed to melt away in front of him. Buffy stood as Angel approached and stopped a few feet from her; although they didn't touch, the emotions arcing between them were almost tangible.

"Angel," Buffy said breathlessly.

"Buffy," he returned, his eyes never leaving Buffy's face.

Xander finally cleared his throat with disgust when it didn't seem like either of them were going to say anything else. Both of them blinked, remembering their audience, and Angel looked over. "Hey," he greeted the other two calmly. "How are you doing, Willow?"

Willow turned faintly pink again. "I'm fine, now," she answer brightly, "at least, Giles says I'm going to be fine and so did Natalie, so they're both probably right and, um..." Her voice trailed off as she realized she was babbling. Angel looked amused and Buffy tried to smother a smile. Xander rolled

his eyes, and an awkward silence fell, as Buffy and Angel tried not to look at each other, and Xander and Willow tried not to look at Buffy and Angel.

The tension, combined with his own lingering guilt as he saw the heavy bandage beneath Angel's jacket, was abruptly too much for Xander. He jumped to his feet and took Willow's hand.

"Just this once," he informed Angel tightly, with a warning glare. "Once. Then we're even." Without looking back, he pulled Willow towards the dance floor; her eyes were wide in shock, but she followed without protest as another song started, leaving Angel and Buffy alone.

† † †

Angel watched Xander go with surprise, then looked back at Buffy, who seemed to be equally at a loss. "What *did* you guys get into?" she finally asked, tentatively touching the bandage that just showed under his sleeve.

The arm was healing and the slight pressure didn't hurt, but he moved away anyway and met her eyes levelly, trying to keep his own blank. Trying not to show how much he wanted to hold her. "Didn't he tell you?"

"Obviously not all of it." Angel stayed stubbornly silent, and she looked disgusted, then gave in. "I, um.... was starting to think you weren't going to come."

"I said I would."

"Yeah. I know." Silence fell again; Angel shoved his hands into his pockets, letting the music wrap around him. Anything for a distraction.

"... You come out at night/that's when the energy comes/and the dark side's light/and the vampires roam..."

He winced at the fiendishly appropriate lyrics, and saw Buffy do the same. Their eyes met again, Buffy's lit with a wry amusement that echoed his own. "Ever feel like the universe is trying to make a point?" she asked with a small, wicked grin.

He half-smiled in spite of himself. "Yeah. All the time." His smile faded; he hated himself when he saw hers dim in response, but couldn't stop it. They shouldn't be doing this, shouldn't be together like this....

"Look," Buffy said abruptly, quickly, "I know you're trying to stay away from me and I know why and I can usually deal with that, but I've had a really harsh week and I can't right now, so could you please just dance with me?"

He blinked under the cascade of words, and really looked at her for the first time, finally seeing the desperate fatigue on her face, the shadows under and behind her eyes. His narrowed as he took in the set of almost invisible bruises around her throat, beneath his cross.

She looked tired, and alone, and desperately in need of comfort, and he just wasn't strong enough tonight to walk away.

Wordlessly, he held out his arms and she moved into them, wrapping hers around his waist and settling her face into the soft velvet of his jacket with a heavy sigh. Carefully, he moved them the few steps to the dance floor; she followed along bonelessly, trustingly, and he let his hands spread out over her back, resting his cheek on her hair and swaying gently with the music.

"...You live in a church, where you sleep with voodoo dolls/And you won't give up the search, for the ghosts in the halls/You wear sandals in the snow and a smile that won't wash away/Can you look out the window without your shadow getting in the way...."

Xander caught his attention from a few feet away; the kid's face was rigidly controlled, and his eyes met Angel's in an unmistakable warning. Angel nodded, careful not to disturb Buffy, in acknowledgment. Just this once.

Xander returned the nod, his face softening slightly as he looked down at Willow, whose auburn head was nestled securely in his collarbone. His arms tightened around her, smoothing her hair, and she snuggled against him, her eyes shut and her young, innocent face reflecting the same tired contentment as Buffy's.

"...You're so beautiful, with an edge and a charm/And so careful, when I'm in your arms...."

"Angel?" Buffy said quietly against his chest.

He moved his hand on her back, a small, careful stroke. "Yeah?"

She didn't look up. "Thanks for taking care of Xander."

He smiled down at the top of her head, and pulled her a little closer. Just this once, he promised himself yet again, feeling her warm and breathing and safe against him. Just this once. "No problem."

They danced together as the music drifted around them, and the world stopped for a few precious minutes.

"...Because you're worth it, building a mystery/Holding on, and holding in/Yeah you're worth it, building a mystery/and choosing so carefully...."

† fin †

a Buffy the Vampire Slayer novella

Spring Break Sidekick Style

Perri Smith

Author's Note

It all started very innocently, as most evil things do. Valerie Meachum was in town overnight during the infamous 'Pooh Tour', and came to hang at my house. While she was there, we watched all three episodes of *Buffy* that had aired at that time, in addition to an episode of *Forever Knight*, finishing our mini-marathon at about 4 a.m. Strange things happen when you do this... Val called about two days later to inform me she'd been attacked by a cross-over, and kept me updated (long distance) for the next several weeks.

Finally, I got curious and asked her, "Well, when Buffy and crew are getting into all this trouble in Toronto, what's poor Xander doing stuck at home?" Big mistake; naturally, I wound up writing it. Then Angel showed up for the ride, bit players started demanding names and dialogue, little critters started running around the gallery, Angel started stonewalling... You get the idea. Oddly enough, I wasn't a big Xander fan before I started writing; by the end of the story, I adored him.

The events of "Spring Break Sidekick Style" run concurrently with those in "Spring Break Slayer Style", Valerie's *Forever Knight* crossover, and occur somewhere between the Buffy episodes 'I Robot, You Jane' and 'The Puppet Show'. Read the stories in whatever order you like; you'll have fun, regardless.

THANK YOU TO: Valerie, whom I blame entirely for this (even though she blames me entirely for the other half of this, but that's not the point! How was I supposed to resist the concept of Xander and Angel, on the loose, together, without any referees?); my dad, for invaluable plotting help and for not even blinking at being asked questions like "What lives in the sewers besides vampires and alligators?" at the dinner table; my mom, who accepted said dinnertime conversations without strangling the both of us; and Jennifer Mingee, for putting up with me when I plotted out loud, betareading, and not giggling at me (much) when characters began taking over my brain.

And always, the other four Horsechicks of the Apocalypse — Christina, Lizbet, Dianne and Catherine — who variously nagged, harrassed, betaread, tolerated, tortured, sympathized, laughed, encouraged, and helped make Xander's life a living hell. Nobody does it better.

—Perri

Disclaimer: This is an amateur publication, intended for the enjoyment of fans of *Forever Knight* and *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, and for the unofficial promotion of these programs. It is not produced in association with Sony Television, Paragon Entertainment, The WB Network, Mutant Enemy Inc., or any other copyright holder or licensee. This publication is neither intended nor expected to be a profit-making venture.

SPRING BREAK SIDEKICK STYLE

(or How Xander Knows Where Angel Lives)

† † †

by Perri Smith
with assistance from Valerie Meachum

When the world's gone crazy and it makes no sense
There's only one voice that comes to your defense
The jury's out and your eyes search the room
And one friendly face is all you need to see....
It's hard to say it
I hate to say it, but it's probably me

—Sting, "It's Probably Me"

Chapter 1

Xander was bored.

"Bored, bored, bored," he muttered under his breath, crossing his arms and staring down at the ends of his dirty sneakers. "Where's a vampire attack when you need one? Or a nice demon? Or even another giant bug? *Some*thing."

But no. The school library was utterly silent; even Giles was off doing whatever it was that Watchers did when their Slayers were out of town. And why did Willow have to go along with Buffy to that stupid family reunion, just to keep Buffy company? She should have stayed around and kept Xander company, instead of leaving him all alone for all of Spring Break, bored.

He let his head fall back and started twirling Giles' chair from side to side, in rhythm with his sing-song thoughts. *Bored, bored, bored, bored....*

Being bored actually wasn't usually a problem for Xander; at least, it hadn't been since this school year started. Besides the usual schoolwork, and the completely unjustified amounts of homework required of a high school sophomore, there were his extracurricular hobbies, which tended to swallow a lot of hours. (Unfortunately, helping to slay the Legions of Darkness and longing hopelessly after the Slayer weren't the kind of things you could put on a college application.)

But said Slayer was out of town, she'd taken Xander's best friend with her, his previous best friend had been turned into a vampire (then into a pile of dust, but he *really* didn't want to go there), there were no classes, and he had, in utter desperation, finished his math homework the night before.

In short, life was totally and completely boring, to the point that he was sitting in an empty school library, staring at the bookshelves because he couldn't think of anything else to do.

"As I understand the concept," a dry British voice said in front of him, "Spring Break is supposed to be when one avoids school with great intensity, rather than sitting there endlessly."

Xander lifted his head and found Giles leaning over the check-out desk, eyebrows lifted in mild inquiry. He was wearing his usual sweater vest and carrying a pile of books with titles that were impossible to read from Xander's angle. Of course, knowing Giles, they'd probably be impossible for any normal person to read from any angle.

Xander shrugged without moving further from his slouch. "Oh, just holding down the fort, in case some other complete loser comes in and wants to check out a book or something, because he has totally nothing else to do with his life."

Giles blinked, started to say something, then adjusted his glasses and started over. "They've only been gone for two days, Xander. Surely you have other friends?"

"Who, me?" Xander straightened up, his feet thunking on the floor. Okay, yeah, he'd just said as much, but it sounded different coming from Giles. Like, bad. "Sure, I've got lots of friends, tons. I just, you know, figured you might want some company."

Giles wasn't buying it, but at least tried to pretend he was. Setting his books down with a soft thud, he nailed Xander with a sympathetic, but firm look. "If you have friends, then go find them," he ordered. "The sun is shining, as it always does in this place, the sky is clear, and while I appreciate your... concern, I'm sure you can find something better to do with your time then sitting in a musty library."

Xander, having painted himself neatly into a corner, found himself with no options other than to stand up. "You sure you don't need me here?" he persisted, in a last-ditch effort. "You know, to look up some kind of ancient cults, or weird ghosts, or demons, or something?"

Giles shook his head. "Absolutely not. The supernatural denizens of Sunnydale appear to have taken their cue from Buffy and gone on holiday. Now go enjoy yourself. Go," he repeated firmly, when Xander tried to argue again.

Xander gave in, shuffling slowly towards the door, feeling Giles' eyes on him the whole way. The library door swung shut behind him.

Outside, the sun *was* shining, much too brightly to suit Xander's mood. He scuffed down the front steps of the school and dropped his skateboard, shoving off down the sidewalk in no particular direction and looking for a distraction.

But distractions were hard to come by in Sunnydale. Two movie theatres (which were playing movies he'd already seen with Buffy and Willow), an ice cream bar (where half the school would be hanging out in groups and a guy alone would look like a geek), the Bronze (which wouldn't open until seven), and the lone Starbucks (where the other half of the school was hanging out in groups). Lots of choices.

"You know, man," he told himself, stopping in front of the comic store for lack of anything better to do, "you really need to get a life that doesn't involve ravening hordes of the undead."

The comic store failed to hold his interest for more than half an hour. He left loaded up with comics he was too bored to read and went back to wandering aimlessly on his skateboard, finally winding up in the Sunnydale Historic District — the tourist section of town, with buildings that supposedly dated back to Sunnydale's days as a mining center.

A sign over one of the old buildings — The Summers Gallery — caught his eye. Without thinking about it, he stopped the skateboard and tucked it back under his arm, avoided the City of Sunnydale utility van parked in the street, and opened the door of Buffy's mom's gallery.

The bell above the door rang with a soft chime as Xander went in, looking around curiously. He'd only been in the gallery a few times, and the last time he'd seen it, the display was all African tribal carvings; at least, that was what Buffy's mom had called them. They'd been sort of cool, until he'd seen the hyena statue in back and exited stage left.

This time, he found himself surrounded by tangled bunches of wire and metal that looked like someone had gone crazy with a blow torch. The exhibit was obviously only half-finished, open crates and packing material scattered all over the floor, but he didn't think it would be any more interesting when everything was set up.

"Great, there's not even anything to do here," he complained softly, almost ready to turn around and leave again.

† † †

Joyce Summers was having a pretty bad week. First, she'd been forced to stay home from the

reunion because of the plumbing. Now, her assistant's father had landed in the hospital with a stroke, which meant her assistant was flying towards New York, and wouldn't be back for at least a week. Which left Joyce trying to prepare an opening with absolutely no help.

She sighed in frustration when heard the door bell chime from the back room, and hurried out of her office, ready to politely intercept and dispose of a potential customer, then jump back into the thicket of work.

"I'm sorry, we're not open today," she started to say, but broke off the speech and smiled when she recognized Buffy's nice young friend Xander, caught halfway in, halfway out of the gallery door. "Oh, hello, Xander. I didn't expect to see you here."

"Hey, Mrs. Summers." The teenager lifted one hand in an awkward wave. "I was just, you know, in the neighborhood and figured I'd look in, make sure things were going okay and everything, since Buffy's out of town and all."

He was obviously trying to be very mature, adult, and reassuring, so Joyce tried to hide her smile. With both Buffy and Willow out of town, the poor thing was probably bored to tears.

"Thank you, Xander, that's very thoughtful of you," she said with a straight face. "Everything's going just fine — well, it will as soon as I find out why my pipes have become demonically possessed."

Xander blinked, apparently startled by her phrasing. "Yeah, Buffy said you were having plumbing problems. She was really bummed you couldn't go to Toronto with her."

Joyce sighed. "Well, I was pretty 'bummed' myself. It's just as well, I guess," she added, gesturing at the mess around her. "This exhibit is supposed to open in three days, and my assistant, who was supposed to be in charge of this opening, just got called out of town. I probably would have had to come home anyway. At least this way, Buffy and Willow can enjoy themselves." She made a face, looking around the gallery. "I still might not finish in time."

Laziness and boredom conflicted over Xander's face, along with what looked like an honest urge to be helpful. "Do you, maybe, need any help getting things set up?" he finally offered, supercasually.

Joyce beamed at him. Such a little gentleman; if only Buffy's friends had been as thoughtful in her old school. "That's very sweet, Xander, but it's Spring Break. You should be enjoying yourself outside, with your friends, not be working in a musty old place like this."

Xander rolled his eyes to the ceiling. "What is this, a conspiracy? Honestly, Mrs. Summers," he continued with great and obvious sincerity, "I have absolutely nothing better to do than help you. I would be *honored* to help you. Helping you would be the highlight of my vacation...."

"All right, all right!" Joyce cut him off, laughing. "I get the point, Xander! You can stay and help, but I insist on paying you for your time. Deal?"

"Deal." They shook on it, then Xander looked around again. "So, need any heavy crates lifted, big sculptures handled, what?"

"Actually," Joyce said thoughtfully, studying him, "there are some... smaller things we need to do first."

† † †

Twenty-three pedestals. Fifteen sets of shelves. Seven glass cases. By the time he finished, Xander felt as if he had a dusting cloth permanently attached to his hand. He took a last swipe at the

pedestal against the back wall, and collapsed to the floor, resting his head and back against the heavy wood. His arms felt like limp spaghetti, and he was sure the smell of Lemon Pledge and Windex was going to be permanently rubbed into his skin.

"Xander?" He looked up to see Buffy's mom standing over him, looking concerned, and disgustingly un-tired.

He tried to pull himself up from his exhausted sprawl, but his answering smile was a little sick. "Oh, I'm fine," he lied. "Just, you know, taking a little break before I tackle the next thing. Um, what is the next thing?"

Mrs. Summers looked at her watch. "The next thing is dinner, Xander. It's almost six o'clock; they'll be expecting you at home, won't they?"

"Yeah, I guess so." Which meant he had to get himself off the floor and in motion, something his aching back and legs informed him was not going to happen any time soon. "I'll head out in just a few minutes."

There was that smothered amusement again; Xander wished everyone wouldn't find him quite so funny. "Take your time."

Xander tried to smile again, then let his head thunk back to the pedestal. The sound echoed around the room — then the pedestal thunked back.

"Ow!" Xander rubbed the back of his head and twisted to glare balefully at the pedestal, which had just rocked forward and smacked him. "What the hell was that?"

Mrs. Summers gave him a severe look for the curse, but before she could say anything, the walls shook again, then again, settling into a rhythmic pounding that started low, then rose in volume until Xander thought his ears were going to explode. He found himself effortlessly on his feet in the middle of the room, staring with startled panic at the back wall as the demonic thuds and bangs continued.

"Oh, not again!" She was standing only a few feet away, but Mrs. Summers still had to raise her voice for it to carry over the racket. "If that plumber isn't here by tomorrow morning, I'm going to go in after those pipes myself!"

"Pipes?" Xander shouted incredulously. "All that is just pipes?" It sounded more like hordes of crazed monkeys gleefully banging away on giant xylophones.

The noise stopped as abruptly as it had begun, leaving them in eerie, ringing silence. Xander rubbed his ears and discovered that the ringing was coming from his eardrums, not the air. "Whoa."

Mrs. Summers nodded, looking resigned. "This is why I stayed home from Toronto."

Xander shook his head and worked his jaw, which did absolutely nothing for his ears. He'd come out of the Bronze with less of a hearing loss. "Maybe you're right; you do need an exorcist."

Mrs. Summers laughed. "It's a thought, but I'll try the plumber first. It's so hard to find a good exorcist."

Xander automatically opened his mouth to volunteer Giles' services — he'd been pretty good against witches and demons, according to Buffy — then shut up again, fast. Time to get out of here before he slipped. "Well, I hope you have good luck with the plumber. I'd better head for home."

He headed for the front door where he'd dropped his stuff. "Um, do you need any more help tomorrow?" he asked, half-hopeful, half-fearful.

Mrs. Summers was digging in her purse. "If you'd like to come, I could use the hands." She straightened, and held a twenty dollar bill towards him. "And here's today's pay."

"Oh, no, you don't have to do that," he tried to refuse.

Mrs. Summers shook the bill impatiently, smiling. "You earned it, Xander. Go have some fun."

"Well..." Xander pictured the number of drinks he could buy girls at the Bronze. And he *had* been working pretty hard.... "If you think you have to and all."

"I do."

"Okay." He took the money, shoving it into his back pocket. "See you tomorrow morning." He headed out the front door, dropping his skateboard to the ground, and hearing her lock the door after him.

Hopefully, he'd get to do something the next day besides clean. Dishpan hands were *really* bad for his image.

Chapter 2

"...You'll never see the courage I know/Its colors' richness won't appear within your view/I'll never glow - the way that you glow/Your presence dominates the judgments made on you..."

The Bronze was doing pretty good business that night. A lot of kids had headed for the hills (the beach, actually) the second Spring Break began, but a lot more had hung around, and were crowding the tables and dance floor of the only teen club in Sunnydale.

Xander sat at a table in the back corner, nursing a soda and trying to find a good-looking girl who wasn't with a guy. So far, the pickings were pretty slim, with the exception of a gorgeous brunette on the other side of the room. But she was already surrounded by guys, and, somehow, he just wasn't in the mood to go trolling.

Now, if Buffy and Willow were here, they'd be holding down a table together, and the two girls would be laughing at him behind his back whenever he made a pass, struck out, and retreated to safety. Of course, since half those passes were at Buffy, that was probably kind of understandable. And he didn't really mind them laughing at him — Willow was cute when she laughed, and Buffy was downright gorgeous.

"...But as the scenery grows, I see in different lights/The shades and shadows undulate in my perception/My feelings swell and stretch; I see from greater heights/I understand what I am still too proud to mention - to you..."

Since it was Spring Break, the owner had sprung for a live band every weeknight. Tonight was a grunge band that was a little too loud, even for Xander, and a female lead singer who was a little too off-key. Still, it wasn't like he had anything better to do. So he stirred his Coke, and watched the ice cubes melt, until the sensation of eyes on him made the hair on the back of his neck stand up on end.

Xander looked around, praying one of the babes in Cordelia's bunch was giving him the eye, but they were all clustered together listening to Cordelia expound on something. He kept looking, checking the bar, the dance floor, and the upper level, before he caught sight of a familiar figure behind the staircase. A tall, dark figure wearing a black jacket over a white T-shirt.

"Terrific," he mumbled with mild disgust. "The Great Fanged One returns. When I asked for vampires, I didn't mean Sunnydale's answer to Deep Throat. Or Deep Fang. Or whatever."

He honestly didn't know what Buffy saw in the guy. Okay, sure, he had that tall, dark and mysterious thing going for him, but Angel apparently had almost no sense of humor, rarely cracked a smile, and in short, was intensely personality-deprived, unlike, say, Xander.

And that was beside the fact that he was a vampire.

Still, Angel seemed to be tense (as usual), and he only showed up in the Bronze when he needed to find Buffy — which he hadn't done for a while, come to think of it. Maybe there was something going on. Maybe Xander could help. Maybe Xander could keep from dying of boredom

before midnight.

"Maybe Xander can wind up lunch meat before dawn," he told himself sternly. "Let Angel take care of things himself for once. Just sit back and stay out of it."

Yeah. Right.

"*...You'll say you'd never give up seeing eye to eye/But never is a promise, and you can't afford to lie...*"

With a heavy sigh, he dragged himself off his stool and headed towards Angel, who looked surprised — well, as surprised as Angel ever looked. But the vampire kept his hands tucked in his jacket pockets and waited until Xander worked his way through the crowd to within hearing distance.

"Angel." Well, how the hell *were* you supposed to greet a 240-year-old vampire who was after the girl you were in love with? 'Hey, how's it going?' didn't seem really appropriate. Besides, Xander was damned if he was going to give a guy who was nothing but trouble for Buffy one inch more slack than he had to. "What do you want?"

"Xander," Angel returned in exactly the same flat, wary tone. His dark eyes were lost in shadow, unreadable, but Xander could feel the intensity of Angel's stare. Which wasn't really all that comfortable. "Where's Buffy?"

"Vacation. With Willow." Xander tried standing up a little straighter to match Angel's height. He thought he did pretty well at matching the attitude. "What's going on?"

Angel shook his head, flicking his eyes over Xander's shoulder. Xander turned his head, and saw that Angel was watching the brunette Xander had noticed earlier. The brunette smiled back at him in the traditional female response to Angel, Xander noted with disgust.

"Nothing important," Angel said, looking back at Xander. "I'll handle it."

"Well, that's good." He managed to keep from adding the 'for once' with an act of will, and decided he really didn't want to know what was going on, anyway. The steady stare was giving him the creeps, so he started backing off casually. "I'll tell Buffy you, ah, stopped by."

"I'd rather you didn't."

Which was just fine by Xander. "My lips are sealed."

"...You'll never live the life that I live/I'll never live the life that wakes me in the night/You'll never hear the message I give..."

"Where is she?" Angel asked suddenly, as if the words were being forced out of him.

Xander turned back. "Toronto. Some kind of family reunion, she... said." His voice trailed off as Angel seemed to choke, his eyes going wide. "What?" Xander demanded. "What did I say?"

† † †

"And he answered...?"

Xander shrugged in utter cluelessness. Unfortunately, Giles couldn't see it, since his head, shoulders and most of his back were currently buried in a huge box of books. "Nothing. He just looked kind of freaked — which is a really weird thing to see Angel looking, I might add — then left."

Giles withdrew from the box, dust liberally covering his face and shirt, and resettled his glasses. "Odd. What could be so disturbing about Canada, for heaven's sake?"

"Knowing Buffy? Toads are gonna fall from the sky."

Giles aimed a quelling look in Xander's direction. "That's a very comforting notion."

Xander shrugged again. "Hey, this is Buffy. Anything's possible. Anyway, Angel wasn't in a

friendly, chit-chat kind of mood — not that he ever is — so I didn't get the chance to ask him anything else."

"That was probably fortunate," Giles said, adding books to one of the stacks next to him. "I really do think you should be staying as far away from Angel as humanly possible, both you and Willow. And Buffy, for that matter, although there's no point in telling her that. Fortunately, Angel himself seems to be keeping his distance."

One of the stacks started to topple; Xander leaned off the big center table just in time to catch it, and shoved the books back on balance. "Probably because Buffy'd kick his butt if he messed with us... if I didn't do it first," he tacked on hastily.

Giles looked less than impressed. "Still, all feelings towards Buffy aside, Angel is an unpredictable quantity. And he *is* a vampire.... What's that expression Buffy is so fond of? 'Better safe than lunch'?"

"Yeah, yeah, heard it before. I'll be careful; it's not like I'm all hot to start palling around with him, anyway." Xander pulled himself back to his sitting position on top of the table, leaning over to inspect the books from a safer angle. "What are all these, anyway? They look like they came out of someone's basement."

"In point of fact, they did," Giles answered absently. "I persuaded the principal to purchase them from an estate sale. They seem to be journals and histories from the turn of the century, when Sunnydale's mining industry was at its height."

He opened one of the books, flipping through it. "Fascinating material. Do you know at its peak, Sunnydale rivaled San Francisco's output of gold and other precious metals, although it received far less publicity; the entire town is more or less built over the old mines. In fact, the Welsh immigrants who worked the mines...."

"Hey, that's great," Xander broke in, sliding off the table and backing towards the door before Giles could get really rolling on a history lecture. Xander wasn't quite *that* bored. "You know, it's past dinner time and I'm starving — man cannot live on books alone, and all that. Why don't I run out and find us some food, bring it back, you know?"

It took Giles a second to tear himself from his book and look up. "Ah, yes, good thought, good thought. You have money?"

"Oh yeah, Buffy's mom is paying me for working in the gallery. Pizza sound good?" He waited for an answer, but Giles had disappeared back into his book, and didn't look to be coming out any time soon. "Ookay. Pizza it is."

Abandoning the computer and the stack of books Giles had given him to catalogue, Xander escaped out the library door, debating mentally between the Domino's across the street and the smaller place a couple of blocks north of the school. The smaller place won by virtue of having crust that didn't taste like cardboard, and he slapped his skateboard down.

† † †

Giles, not nearly as lost in his research as he'd allowed Xander to believe, watched the young man go with a resigned sigh. The boy had shown up at the library a few hours earlier, looking pathetic and neglected. He'd apparently been ejected from the Summers Gallery, and Giles hadn't had the heart to send him away.

At least Mrs. Summers had found work to occupy Xander for most of the day; otherwise, he

would probably have found his way back to the library even earlier, and spent even more of his time making Giles' life difficult.

Actually, that was less than fair, Giles corrected himself. Xander hadn't complained once about cataloguing books or reshelving them, and the boy was actually fairly knowledgeable in some areas. They'd held a very entertaining debate on American football versus the British variety, what Xander called soccer.

Still, when he'd come to Sunnydale to take over as Watcher, he'd been expecting to deal with one American teenager; he hadn't anticipated becoming responsible for the lives of two more in the process. He was rather fond of Willow, for obvious reasons — she could be rather frighteningly similar to Giles himself, which, he supposed, was only to be expected — and Buffy was quickly becoming a valued friend, rather than simply the Slayer. But Xander....

Well, the boy did try, even if his recklessness and hormones frequently took over his judgment, and he was unswervingly loyal to Buffy (animal possessions and other incidents beyond his control aside). And he was learning, if slowly; that rescue of the book stack a few minutes earlier had shown quick reflexes Giles didn't recall seeing before. Was it just natural adolescent development, or could proximity to the Slayer be causing changes in her companions? An interesting research question....

He shook off the train of thought and returned to his work, which truly was fascinating. Several of the journals seemed to hold records of supernatural events not present in any of his other research materials. He looked forward to correlating the information for Buffy. Not that she'd care until it became crucial.

The phone rang before he could really settle into his reading; his knees protested as he pulled himself to his feet and picked up the extension behind his desk. "Sunnydale High School Library, Rupert Giles speaking."

"Giles? It's me." The voice was unmistakably Buffy's — upbeat and cheerful. But he didn't miss the air of tension behind her words.

"Buffy, what's happened?" he demanded instantly.

He could almost see the disgusted face she was undoubtedly making. "Why do you always think something's gone wrong?"

"You mean it hasn't?"

"Well.... Okay, maybe a little."

Giles listened with growing disturbance to her tales of vampires in Toronto, which turned into outright, stomach-clenching fear when she, after being prompted, told him about the attack on Willow by one of those vampires, and their subsequent rescue by a second vampire, who was, apparently, one of the 'good guys'.

His reaction was entirely predictable and completely justified. "I'll be on the next flight up."

"Giles, you really don't have to come!" Buffy protested instantly, and not unexpectedly. "Everything is under control. Really. Would I lie to you?"

"Not only would, but have," Giles responded just as quickly, already trying to juggle flight schedules in his head. He'd have to pack, and someone would have to be left in charge at the library. Probably Xander, God help them all. "Might I remind you of the Waverly Park incident, when you swore you wouldn't do anything foolish and promptly did precisely that, despite both my warnings and Angel's?"

"Well, okay," Buffy admitted, "but that doesn't count. I have never actually, directly lied to you. I didn't.... Anyway," she returned determinedly to her point, obviously aware she was going to

lose that argument, "the important thing is we're okay. Okay, Willow isn't 100% okay, but Natalie says she will be in, like, nothing flat; and she's a doctor, so—"

"Buffy," Giles interrupted firmly; if he waited for her to take a breath, he'd be waiting there until the end of time. "May I speak to her, please?"

Buffy paused. "Um, that'll have to be later, because I don't think I could wake her up right now...."

"Buffy. I meant your cousin."

"Oh. 'Her,' Natalie, not 'her,' Willow. Just a second."

Giles slipped his fingers up under his glasses to rub his eyes, waiting for the transfer. He was already getting a headache, and had a feeling it was going to get much worse before it got better.

Chapter 3

One large pizza with extra cheese, pepperoni, green pepper and black olives later, Xander headed back to the school. His footsteps echoed hollowly in the halls, but he almost couldn't hear them over the roaring of his stomach. The pizza smelled delicious, and he patted himself on the back for having the willpower and generosity to wait to eat any of it until Giles got some.

"Hey, Giles, food's here!" he announced as he went through the doors.

Giles shushed him with a gesture, and without turning away from the intense phone conversation he was having. Xander blinked, laid the pizza down, and opened the box, trying not to look like he was eavesdropping. Which he was, of course, but there was no need to be *too* obvious about it.

"I assumed she had decided once again that she could handle everything on her own," Giles was saying. "I feel somewhat better knowing that she does have a support structure."

She? The only 'she' Giles ever talked about in that half-worried, half-irritated tone of voice was Buffy. Xander pulled a piece of pizza loose and took a huge bite, settling down on the tabletop again. "If that's Buffy," he said around the mouthful, "tell her I said hi, and not to worry — I'm taking care of things."

Giles didn't appear to hear him. "Yes, an unexpected development, to say the least," he agreed with whoever he was talking to. Xander chewed thoughtfully, watching Giles. The librarian seemed sort of... nervous. More than usual.

"I don't doubt it for a moment," Giles continued, fiddling with his glasses. There was a long pause, then he asked, "And she *is* all right? You're certain?"

Xander almost choked on his pizza. Giles had gone past nervous to downright concerned. "*Who's* all right?" he demanded, sliding off the table with a thump and giving up every pretense of not listening. "Giles, what's going on?"

"Excuse me, Dr. Lambert," Giles said, then covered the receiver with his hand. "Nothing, Xander, everyone's fine. Go on, go back to your dinner."

Xander glowered stubbornly and didn't move; after a long moment, Giles sighed and put the phone back to his ear. "My apologies, Dr. Lambert. Buffy and Willow's friend Xander is with me at the moment. You were saying?"

Another pause, and Xander resisted the impulse to grab the phone away from Giles. If one of the girls had been hurt.... He had a sudden, sickening flash of Willow lying in a pool of blood, a vampire crouched over her.... the memory of Buffy, slammed to the floor under his own uncaring hands.... He had to work to swallow past the hard, scared lump in his throat.

"Thank God," Giles finally breathed, and Xander tried to find some comfort in Giles' obvious relief. "And thanks to your friend Mr. Knight, I'm told. Buffy says his intervention saved Willow's...." He looked sideways at Xander and visibly edited himself, "saved us all a great deal of trouble."

Xander glared at Giles, who turned away uncomfortably, saying, "He has my gratitude. As do you, for restoring my peace of mind. Survival is all well and good, but I will sleep better tonight knowing she has good care and comfort. Though I may lose part of that sleep wrestling with the notion that she was spared worse suffering by... well, by those particular circumstances. I'm afraid that will take some getting used to."

"Survival?" Xander repeated, hearing the total lack of cool in his voice and not caring. "Care and comfort? Saved Willow's what? Hello, Giles, what's happening?"

He tried to grab Giles's shoulder, but the older man sidestepped him easily. "Just one," he said to whoever he was talking to. "What hotel would you recommend when I arrive tomorrow morning?"

"Arrive where? Toronto?" Giles continued to ignore him and Xander finally stomped back to the table, kicking at a chair as he went, then sat back down and crossed his arms, still glaring at Giles with all his strength.

Giles finally hung up, and stared at the phone for a long moment. "I should have known," he muttered to himself. "I should have guessed. Damn."

Xander held onto his temper by the skin of his teeth; yelling at Giles had never, in the history of the universe, accomplished anything. But it was really close.

"What should you have guessed?" he demanded instead, with all the calm that his worried 16-year-old soul could muster (which wasn't much, but hey...).

Giles had the nerve to look around as if he'd forgotten Xander was in the room. "Ah, Xander. I'm going to have to take a raincheck on the meal, I'm afraid. Would you lock up the library after you leave, and attempt to bring some order to this chaos if you have a chance?"

Xander left the table yet again, to trail after Giles as the librarian started collecting his jacket, several books, and other odds and ends. "Why are you going to Toronto? Did someone hurt one of the girls? If someone hurt the girls, I'm coming, too!"

That seemed to finally get Giles's attention. "Both of the girls are fine," he said, stopping and facing Xander. "At least, they will be shortly. Buffy has simply run into a few complications she needs a Watcher's assistance in dealing with. And, as you are not a Watcher, you are *not* coming."

The last part was said in a tone which suggested there would be no further arguments allowed. Naturally, Xander continued to argue. "Come on, if there's trouble I can help! I have before, right?"

Giles sighed and rubbed the back of his neck. "Xander, your aid has been... invaluable in the past, yes. But at the moment, I believe three of our little club roaming around Toronto is as much as the traffic will bear. And, of course," he pointed out, "there's the fact that if you accompany me, Sunnydale will be left completely undefended. It's your responsibility to remain here and... watch over things."

Xander knew he was being manipulated, knew it without a doubt. But the image of himself, standing alone against the forces of darkness — if anything would impress Buffy, that would be it. "So, I'd be, like, substitute Slayer, right?"

Giles blinked, opening the weapons cabinet and starting to pull various sharp, pointy things out of it. "Yes, I suppose that would be a... reasonably accurate description. Only for a short time, you understand," he tacked on hastily.

"Of course," Xander agreed instantly, already figuring how he could stretch it out. And he'd have to think of a better title — first alternate, maybe? No, Buffy hadn't liked that. "So, you go take care of the girls," he said out loud, "and tell Buffy to relax, I'm taking care of everything here."

"I'm sure it will bring her no end of comfort," Giles agreed dryly. He finished gathering his things, closed and locked the weapons cabinet, and tossed the key ring at Xander, who caught it by

reflex. "Now that that's settled, I'll be seeing you in a few days."

"Yeah, sure." It wasn't until Giles was halfway out the door that Xander realized he still had no idea what was going on. "Hey, Giles, wait! What's happening in Toronto? How did Willow get hurt? Giles!"

Giles never even slowed down, leaving Xander staring at the library doors in frustration, a half-eaten piece of pizza drooping, forgotten, from his hand.

† † †

Getting the library in shape was just too much to deal with; Xander haphazardly combined a few book stacks, promised himself he'd come back to do a better job the next day, and left, taking his pizza with him.

It didn't seem too appetizing, now, compared to the gory images that persisted in running through his mind: Willow hurt, Buffy hurt, Giles tearing into danger after them.... He saw Jesse again, changed from best friend to deadly enemy, and shook his head roughly, trying to stop the images and almost running into a lamppost in the process.

It was a enough of a shock to bring Xander back to his surroundings; he looked around and discovered he was back downtown, in the historical section. After dark. In a town that specialized in vampires. The assignment of substitute Slayer suddenly took on a whole new meaning, a bad one.

His neck prickled, as if eyes were watching him, and a shadow seemed to move next to him; he shoved the skateboard off and headed for the gallery as fast as he could. No vampires could come in, and Mrs. Summers would probably give him a ride home.

There were lights still on in the gallery when he got there, which relieved him to an extent that was embarrassing for the First Alternate Slayer. He ducked through the (unlocked) back door and closed it behind him with a little too much force. The bang echoed through the silent gallery.

Funny, though; as he turned away from the door with a sigh of relief, and propped his skateboard against the wall, he could have sworn he heard a muffled, high-pitched giggle.

He shook it off as another result of his over-active imagination and walked towards the main room of the gallery, calling, "Mrs. Summers? Are you still here?"

The lights abruptly went out.

Xander froze with one foot in the room, straining to make out anything in the darkness. Nothing moved, and the only sound was his own breathing. Until something giggled again.

"Nobody home here." The hair on the back of Xander's neck stood up as the weird, high-pitched voice twisted out of the darkness. "Noooobody ho-ome."

"Who— who's there?" he stuttered, holding the pizza box in front of him like a shield. "I'm warning you, you don't want to mess with me!"

Something brushed against the back of his leg; he whirled, almost dropping the pizza. There was another chittering giggle, which ran around the room like a wave. Something — someone — started thumping softly and that sound spread too, picked up from all sides until the air seemed to be shaking with the rhythm.

"All right, that's it," Xander announced loudly, as he forced down the terror that was trying to climb up the back of his throat from his stomach. It was probably just some kids, playing games. Nothing to worry about. "If the lights aren't on and this room empty in the next three seconds, I'm

calling the cops. One... two..."

Before he could finish the count, a flashlight suddenly clicked on. Xander looked down at the circle of light that had appeared next to his knee — and jumped back with a startled yell (*not* a scream, guys don't scream), as a wrinkled, grey, unearthly face grimaced up at him, its huge, dark eyes crossed and leering.

He stumbled backwards, dropping the pizza box, tripped over something on the floor and landed hard on his butt. Another circle of light appeared, and he saw two long, spindly arms reaching for him, attached to another of those grimacing faces. He tried to scrabble further back, away from the thing, and ran hard into the wall. A third creature appeared, then a fourth and fifth, all leering at him, their wrinkled, grey faces screwed up in ugly, taunting expressions, mouths that were little more than ear-to-ear slits leering from beneath hooked noses and ears. Xander shouted again, kicking out—

— and the flashlights went out as Mrs. Summers' voice echoed from the back door. "Hello? What's going on here?"

The lights came on and Xander found himself sprawled on the floor by the doorway, blinking up at Mrs. Summers, who was staring down at him with surprise.

"Xander?" she asked cautiously, and Xander realized his hands were shaking.

"Um, yeah," he answered, trying to keep his voice steady. The room was empty, he saw as he looked frantically around; he smiled sickly. "Hi, Mrs. Summers."

"What are you doing here?"

"Um...." Hallucinating? Being attacked by dwarves? She'd think he was on drugs. His eyes fell on the flat box by his feet and inspiration hit. "Bringing pizza!" He scrambled to his feet, talking as quickly as possible. "Yeah, Gil... um, Mr. Giles bailed on me when I was helping out at the library and I had this huge pizza and no one at my house likes green pepper so I figured I'd see if you wanted some of it so I came by."

He had to stop finally to breathe, then held the breath, waiting to see if she bought it.

Mrs. Summers, long accustomed to the weirdnesses of Life with Buffy even though she didn't know the specific circumstances behind them, seemed willing to put his oddities down to normal teenage behavior.

"Well, thank you, Xander," she said, coming the rest of the way into the room. "That was very thoughtful of you. I'm sure it will be... delicious." Xander followed her dubious eyes down to the flattened pizza box and groaned mentally. So much for meet him there."

With Giles, the expert on weird, out of town, Xander was going to have to settle for the next best thing.

The expert on sewers.

Chapter 4

"... It wasn't my intention to deceive you/It never should have been this way/It's true I did extend the invitation/I never knew how long you'd stay..."

The music blasting from the stage was a little too loud, but Angel had long ago learned to ignore distractions. He lurked around the corners of the Bronze, sticking to the shadows and keeping his eyes open for others of his kind. He'd had to warn off another vampire the night before, when she'd tried to make a meal out of one of the teenagers who thronged to the club.

Angel shouldn't have interfered in her hunt; wouldn't have, beyond warning Buffy she was around. Except that Buffy wasn't around, and Adrianne had picked a girl to feed on. A teenage girl, with blonde hair and an innocent face.

The outcome of the confrontation had been a little too close, only the crowd in the Bronze keeping Adrianne from going for his throat. He'd won, but just barely, and Adrianne hadn't been at all happy about losing; he was going to have to watch his back for a while

Buffy was a bad influence on him, Angel admitted to himself. It was getting harder to stand back and watch the vampires feast, knowing how damned likely it was that, someday soon, Buffy herself would be one of the victims. He was determined to put that day as far off as possible, but Slayer life expectancies were less than good.

He missed her. He spent entirely too much time lurking in this damn club, trying to catch a glimpse of her even when he had no legitimate reason to approach her. He knew he had to stay away, for both their own good, but that was... impossible.

"...When you hear temptation call/It's your heart that takes/Takes the fall..."

"Yo!" Angel looked up automatically at the call, and saw Buffy's friend Xander pushing his way through the crowds towards the stairs with a complete disregard for feet, ribs and elbows, his own or anyone else's. Angel thought about disappearing, but curiosity got the better of him and he waited.

Xander finally maneuvered through the crowd, almost upsetting a waitress along the way to Angel's current lurk, and demanded, "What lives in the sewers besides alligators and vampires?"

Angel couldn't quite stop his eyebrows from lifting. "What?"

"What else lives in the sewers?" Xander repeated impatiently. "Like, is there anything small and kinda ugly that runs around down there? And messes with pipes?"

Angel didn't say anything for a long second, studying Xander. He was almost bouncing in place, his eyes intent and just a little scared — but not of Angel, which was something different. Not that Angel would ever hurt one of Buffy's friends, even Xander the Annoying, with his obvious crush on Buffy. But both Xander and Willow tended to stay away from him anyway.

Which attitude Angel planned to encourage. There was no sense in them getting comfortable around vampires, and no sense in Angel getting to know the young mortals, when they'd probably be

gone in an eyeblink, if not sooner. It was an unforgiving world they all lived in, and no one knew that better than him. It was better if they just kept their distance from each other. All of them.

He shook off his dark thoughts and tried to pay attention to Xander's bizarre question. "Small and ugly and messes with pipes? Sounds like a couple of vampires I know, but...."

"No, vampires I recognize." Xander drummed his fingers on the railing of the stairs, obviously thinking hard, then abruptly turned away. "Okay, thanks," he tossed absently over his shoulder.

"...How could I be so blind to this addiction/If I don't stop, the next one is gonna be me..."

Angel reached out and snagged Xander's jacket before he could escape. It was a sign of the kid's distraction that he didn't even jump. "Hang on. What are you up to?"

Xander looked surprised, then curious, as he jerked his jacket out of Angel's grip. "And you're asking because?"

Good question. Angel searched for an answer and settled for, "Because I don't want to run into any surprises when I go home."

Xander visibly thought it over and Angel resisted the urge to 'encourage' him. Finally, Xander shrugged. "There was something weird at Buffy's mom's gallery tonight, a bunch of somethings, in fact. Little guys, all grey and wrinkled and noisy, and with really twisted senses of humor — and they like pizza." Xander seemed faintly bemused by that, but hurriedly continued, "Anyway, I, ah fought them off, but I wanted to be prepared in case they try to come back."

Angel managed to keep his face expressionless; more than likely, the whatever-they-weres had run themselves off after scaring Xander half to death. But he might as well let the kid keep some pride. "Where's the gallery?" he asked instead.

"Historic district, down on Leighton St."

"Historic district," Angel mused, intrigued in spite of himself. "That area's always been known for some pretty strange behavior."

Xander blinked. "Oh, I'd love to know how a vampire defines strange." Angel gave him a Look and Xander backed up a step, hands up in a 'peace' gesture. "Just asking."

"Right." Angel's eyes narrowed. "How do poltergeists grab you?"

"Well, they don't, if I'm lucky." Xander shrugged and added, "Which I'm not, usually."

"I noticed." He thought for a second, then offered, "I'll look around, see what's going on out there," surprising himself, as well as Xander. "You just keep an eye out during the day."

"Okay," Xander said slowly. "That'll be cool. I guess."

Angel echoed Xander's casual shrug. "No problem." Actually, it might be; the sewers were unfriendly places for Angel these days. There were things down there that were only marginally less interested in taking out Angel than munching Xander. But he owed Buffy's mother, after what Darla had done to her....

"...Only emptiness remains/It replaces all, all the pain/Won't you come out and play with me..."

Xander was backing away, clearly unsure of how to end the conversation. "Well, um, see you around then," he blurted out.

"Right." Angel watched Xander push his way back out through the crowd, then sighed in resignation and followed him. Better give the kid a fighter escort home, until they knew what they were dealing with.

If anything happened to Xander that Angel could have stopped, Buffy really *might* stake him.

† † †

The next day was relatively quiet and normal, all things considered. Xander stood guard inside the gallery as long as possible, using all his persuasive powers to convince Mrs. Summers to let him stay just a little longer each time she'd tried to kick him out. He unpacked heavy sculptures from equally heavy wooden crates, stacked the crates in the alley, and lugged the sculptures themselves from place to place, as Mrs. Summers tried to decide how to arrange them. His back hurt and his arms were ready to drop off, but he had to admit the exhibit was starting to look pretty cool.

They'd also been serenaded by three separate appearances from the Percussion Section from Hell, and the mystery guests were getting louder. On the bright side, though, Xander hadn't had to do any cleaning today.

Finally, Mrs. Summers called a halt to the work and firmly shooed Xander out when she left, closing up the gallery behind her. Xander declined a ride home, sauntered off in the general direction of his house — and banged a U-turn back to the gallery as soon as Mrs. Summers' car was out of sight.

Two hours later, he was still crouched uncomfortably in the alley beside the empty crates he'd spent all afternoon stacking behind the gallery, his back against the damp brick wall of the building and one hand convulsively gripping a stake. Not that he was particularly sure it would have any effect against the whosiwhatsits, but it was a weapon. His other hand was locked around a flashlight, ready to flick it on at the first shadow that moved when it shouldn't, which happened about every five seconds.

The rest of the time, he was trying to pretend he wasn't scared to death, and swearing under his breath at Angel, who had yet to make an appearance.

"I must have been out of my mind, trusting a vampire," he grumbled, shifting his weight off the foot that was rapidly falling asleep. "Says he'll be here, then disappears. Probably out tracking down a co-ed or something for dinner, leaving me all alone here to get attacked and eaten by Dwarfs from the Black Lagoon. What's wrong with this picture?"

"The fact that you're sitting in a dark alley talking to yourself?"

"Gahh!" Xander jumped and spun in what he would tell himself later was a smooth, graceful motion. In point of fact, he almost tripped over his own feet.

He did manage to get the stake out and leveled, and Angel looked at it. "You plan on using that?"

Xander tried to control his breathing. "I'm thinking about it," he snapped. "Don't sneak up on me like that!"

"Sorry."

Angel didn't actually look all that apologetic, but Xander let the stake fall back to his side, trying to calm the heart that was threatening to jump out of his chest. "Where have you been, anyway?"

The vampire shrugged casually, his face lost in shadows and unreadable. Xander wondered if he did it deliberately. "Around."

Xander rolled his eyes. "Ah yes, another famous cryptic Angel answer. Very helpful, thank you."

Angel half-laughed, half-snorted, but didn't otherwise respond. "I told you to keep an eye out during the day, not at night. This is a bad place to be hanging around after dark."

"Is there any place on the Hellmouth that isn't?"

"Not really."

"There you go." Xander made his point triumphantly, then remembered what they were

supposed to be there for. "So, did you see anything?"

Angel shook his head slightly. "Nothing underground. I'm going to go look around up here."

"Cool. Oh, wait," Xander remembered as Angel started away, "you, ah, want this?"

He held out the flashlight; Angel looked from it back up to Xander, who could have sworn he actually saw a smile on the vampire's face. "No, thanks," Angel refused. "I don't need it."

"Oh." Feeling slightly silly and resenting it, Xander pulled the flashlight back. "Vampires can, like, see in the dark or something?"

Now he was sure; Angel was definitely laughing at him. "Yeah. If we remember to bring our own flashlights." He produced a small penlight from his pocket and flipped it on and off, sending a brief flash of light across the manhole cover in front of them.

"Oh, well," Xander gave an exaggerated, sarcastic shrug, "if you're going to be like that about it...."

Angel half-laughed again and, without turning his flashlight back on, became one with the shadows. "I thought they only did that in the books," Xander muttered. "Gotta get him to teach me that — well, if the fangs aren't a prerequisite."

He realized he was talking to himself again and firmly told himself to shut up, sinking back down against the crates and settling in to wait. Again.

Waiting wasn't really what Xander was best at; in fact, it was one of his worst things. But he'd been given a crash course in patience since becoming one of the Slayerettes (as Willow took a kind of perverse pleasure in calling herself, Giles and Xander). He couldn't count the number of afternoons and evenings he'd spent hanging around the library, trying to pretend to be doing homework, or helping Giles, or teasing Willow, instead of checking his watch every five seconds and wondering if Buffy had gotten herself munched yet. Trying to think of an excuse to follow her on the pretext of 'helping'.

It was more than just wanting to make sure Buffy was all right, and it was more than just the sense of macho which occasionally proclaimed that *he* should be protecting *her*, instead of vice-versa. Truth be known and all terror aside, it was just easier to round up the other two and go chasing off into the night after Buffy (regardless of the amount of help they would probably *not* be), than to sit and wait.

Giles usually had several pithy things to say about patience being a virtue during and after one of their 'rescues'; Xander had so far kept himself from pointing out that whenever the Slayerette Cavalry galloped to the rescue, Giles invariably led the charge.

Something small and sharp was poking Xander in an inconvenient place; he sighed and shifted position again, flicking his flashlight on and playing the beam idly around the alley. Dumpster, trash cans, open manhole cover, back doors, broken streetlight....

He abruptly brought the flashlight back to the manhole, jolting to his feet as he did so. That cover hadn't been open when Angel had turned on his flashlight a minute ago, but now it gaped like a black mouth in the middle of the alley.

Xander gulped, taking an instinctive step back, then braced himself and took a step forward, clutching stake and flashlight before him like weapons. "W-who's there?" he called quietly, trying to ignore his own stutter.

No answer. Something skittered behind him and he spun, his light tracking across the brick walls, but finding only shadows. Something else ran across the alley in front of him, but, again, he couldn't turn quickly enough to see it.

"This isn't funny," he shouted, frustration beginning to win over fear.

"Funny!" He jumped at the weird, high-pitched voice behind him. "Look out below!"

Something raced past his legs, close enough to touch, but he still couldn't get the flashlight down fast enough. Something else tripped him in passing and he stumbled, hearing a chorus of twisting giggles rise from around him. He twisted frantically, playing the light all around him. The shadows danced and turned, but he couldn't tell which ones were moving from his light and which ones were... not.

The giggles rose in pitch, their owners obvious highly amused by his antics. "All fall down," something crooned in a skewed falsetto.

"Go boom!" something else echoed with great glee. "Big boom!"

"Fall down?" Xander echoed uneasily. "What's that supposed to mean?"

"Guess!" Three small forms suddenly appeared in front of him, grinning ear-to-huge-ear and stretching their long, skinny arms towards them. He yelped and took an involuntary step backwards—

— and tripped over a heavy cinder brick, stumbling back against the crates. His eyes widened as he heard them begin to shift and move, and he turned just in time to see the entire stack come crashing down on him.

He threw up his arms, but they were little protection against the cascade of heavy wooden crates. His breath was driven out of him as he fell, crushed against the pavement by the weight of the crates. Miraculously, nothing hit his head but the ground, but he could feel the pain of bruises all along his ribs and legs. A last crate tumbled down, striking his ankle with fiendish accuracy, and he yelped in pain, his arms trapped beneath the crates and his own body.

He'd dropped his flashlight and it rolled back and forth next to him, sending a circle of light dancing into Xander's eyes and blinding him. Then a dark, misshapen silhouette stepped between the light and his face, leaning close to his face. Xander blinked against the spots dancing before his eyes, and found himself gazing directly into one of the ugly, lumpy, grey faces that had haunted him for two nights.

The thing's eyes were wide and black, its slit of a mouth downturned and grim beneath its huge, hooked nose, and a heavy, sinister scar ran across its cheek down its neck. It reached out a hand towards Xander's face, and Xander, scrabbling uselessly towards his dropped stake with his one free hand, found himself doing the single thing he would have sworn he'd never do.

The crate on top of the pile covering him shuddered under his escape attempts, and fell towards his head, as he used the rest of the air in his lungs to frantically yell, "Angel!!!"

Then everything went black.

Chapter 5

Angel prowled around the edges of the Summers Gallery, his flashlight hidden in his pocket. He could see better in the dark than the light, but the flashlight would come in handy if they actually ran into one of Xander's beasties. Most things that hunted in the dark were afraid of the light.

He half-smiled to himself, ruefully. Of all the ways he might have imagined spending a night, helping sixteen-year-old Xander Harris guard a gallery from gremlins and ghoulies would have come in somewhere below the bottom of the list. Far below.

So far, though, Angel hadn't seen anything out of the ordinary — well, ordinary as far as the Hellmouth was concerned. A few shadows moved where they shouldn't have, and there was a lingering taste of... something in the air, something that felt like the Master at work. But it was nothing major, nothing serious; at least, not yet. Everything seemed to be pretty quiet....

Until Xander yelled, his voice drowned out almost immediately by a continuous crash that rolled through the silent night like thunder. Angel turned in mid-step and ran back towards the alley, hearing Xander call his name in a panicked shout that ended abruptly in silence.

Angel raced around the corner, flicking his flashlight on as he barreled into the alley. The beam played over the walls and the pile of fallen crates, lying over Xander's too-still body. And beside Xander —

Angel froze. A little grey man, stretched and shortened in all the wrong places, his skin lumpy and grotesque, stood over Xander, reaching a hand towards his face. Unexpected rage flared, and Angel felt his face shift, his fangs appear.

"Back off!" he half-snarled, half-yelled, and the creature spun, throwing its hands up and blinking in the beam from the flashlight. From within the crates came a shrill cry of alarm, then a small stampede of critters emerged from the pile, streaming towards the open manhole in a panicked mass. The one standing over Xander shrieked once, cowered back from Angel, and finally managed to stumble after the rest of his cohort, almost falling into the manhole. The lid shuddered and crashed into place over them.

The demon in him started instantly after the creatures, wanting to hunt, to kill. But the part that was still Angel stopped with an act of raw willpower after only a few steps, turning instead to the pile of crates. He threw them off Xander as quickly as he could, hearing them splinter on the ground, and finally cleared off the kid's face and chest.

Kneeling down, he was relieved to see that Xander was still breathing; he smelled blood, and fought back the hungry demon with grim determination, forcing his face to go back to its human façade in the interest of not giving Xander a heart attack when he came around.

"Xander," he said roughly, shaking the kid's shoulder. "Come on, wake up, kid. Wake up!"

Xander groaned, and his head rolled to one side, then back. He opened one eyelid, painfully, and Angel bit back a surge of relief.

"Wha-?" Xander mumbled. "What happened?"

"You got attacked by a pile of wood, among other things," Angel informed him, standing back up to clear the rest of the crates. With an obvious effort, Xander shoved himself to his elbows to watch.

"Did you see them?" he asked, touching his forehead and wincing.

"The little guys?" Angel heaved a huge crate off Xander's right ankle. It was visibly swollen and looked painful as hell. "Yeah. Did they drop these on you?"

Xander shook his head, and looked as if he regretted it. "I don't know. It happened kind of fast. One of them.... He was reaching for me, for my face."

"Yeah. I saw." Angel finished clearing the crates, and returned to Xander's side. There was a large, bloody lump rising on the kid's forehead, but his eyes were focused, if slightly glazed from pain. "Come on, let's get out of here. I don't think they're going to be back tonight."

"Oh yeah?"

Xander squinted up at him questioningly, and Angel shrugged. "They don't seem to like vampires much."

"Imagine that," Xander muttered, as he pulled himself slowly and awkwardly to his feet.

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The trip back to Sunnydale High was slow and painful. Xander limped along on his bruised but unbroken ankle, with Angel as a silent, watchful shadow beside him. The vampire had offered, reluctantly, to help, but Xander had turned him down fast. It would just have been a little too weird.

It was a little too weird anyway. Everything after the last crate falling was pretty vague, but Xander had the distinct memory of Angel running full speed around a corner to save Xander's neck. Which was not exactly something you'd expect a vampire to do, even if he was supposed to be one of the good guys, which was still wide-open for debate as far as Xander was concerned.

It was all very confusing and he had no intention of trying to deal with the concept, especially when his head hurt like someone had been demonstrating a Sledge-O-Matic on it.

They finally made it to the school, and stumbled down the dark, empty halls to the library, Xander opening the doors with Giles' keys. He limped inside, without bothering to see if Angel was following, then limped his way around the desk and collapsed in Giles' chair. Silently, he admitted to himself that he would have really liked it if Giles himself had actually been there to run around with a first aid kit, ice, and his usual flustered scolding about unnecessary risks to whoever he was patching up that time around.

Instead, Xander was going to have to get back up and find the kit himself — as soon as his head stopped swimming in slow circles around the room. He'd get up then, he promised himself. In just a few minutes.

"Here." He jumped, startled, at Angel's voice next to him, and opened his eyes. The vampire was standing next to him, holding out a lumpy towel; Xander took it, and realized it was full of ice. "I think you're supposed to keep your ankle cold," Angel finished diffidently.

"Um, yeah," Xander said slowly. "Thanks."

"No problem." Angel shrugged and moved away, prowling around the library as if looking for escape routes, then drawn, as if against his will, to studying the bookshelves. Xander slowly bent to wrap the towel around his ankle, without taking his eyes off Angel.

The ice hurt like crazy at first, then the pain finally numbed. In his ankle, at least; his head still

throbbed. He weighed the pain of getting up against the deep desire not to ask Angel for *anything*, and started searching Giles's desk. The Buffy Collective gave the Watcher a lot of headaches; he had to keep aspirin *somewhere* within reach.

"Bingo," Xander said under his breath, locating a mostly-empty, economy-size bottle of Tylenol in Giles's lower left-hand drawer. He dry-swallowed several of the pills with an effort and a grimace, then leaned his elbows on the desk and rested his pounding head against it.

"You going to live?"

Angel had appeared beside him without warning again, but Xander was too tired to jump at this point. "Only if my luck's *really* running bad." He opened one eye to look up at Angel. "Do you get some kind of kick out of sneaking up on people?"

"Sorry," Angel said unapologetically. "Force of habit."

"Could you try breaking it, before you give someone, namely me, a heart attack?"

"No."

Xander groaned. "You did see those things, right?"

"Yeah."

"Good. At least I haven't gone completely insane. Yet. Recognize them?"

"I'm... not sure. Maybe." Xander lifted his eyebrows at Angel, which pulled at the lump and hurt, so he lowered them again. Angel didn't appear to notice. "They remind me of something, but I can't pin it down."

"Big surprise there."

"I can leave any time," Angel reminded him, sounding a little irritated.

Xander leaned back and held his hands out, aware that he was pushing it. But Angel didn't exactly make things any easier. "Sorry, okay? I always get kinda testy when things drop on my head."

"Happens a lot?"

If Xander didn't know better, he'd think Angel was making a joke. "All the time, lately." His headache seemed to be backing off a little; the light wasn't skewering his eyes any more. "So, what do we do now?"

Angel looked vaguely startled. "You're asking me?"

"Is there anyone else around?"

"Thought you didn't trust me."

"About as far as Buffy can throw you," Xander confirmed cheerfully. "But I don't exactly see all these alternatives crawling out of the walls, so it looks like I'm stuck with you."

He braced his hands on the desk and hauled himself to his feet with only a small groan, very carefully not looking at Angel. "If Giles was here, he'd be pulling out books and pacing around muttering under his breath in languages no one else speaks. I figure we might be able to handle the part with the books."

"That's debatable," Angel muttered under his breath, but he still followed Xander towards the stacks. Xander tried to fight the itchy knowledge that he was being trailed around by a vampire.

† † †

"Have you found anything yet?"

"In the last two minutes?"

"Yeah."

"No."

"Oh. I just thought, you know, you might have found something you recognized—"

"No."

"Oh." Xander leaned back in his chair and flipped through another book, then flipped it shut and leaned forward again. "Nothing?"

Angel looked up from his book long enough to give Xander a hard look. "Do you give your Watcher this much trouble?"

"He's Buffy's Watcher, not mine," Xander corrected him instantly, "and not always." He considered, then admitted, "Just most of the time. The temptation is kind of irresistible."

Angel closed his eyes and shook his head slightly. "Where is your Watcher, anyway?" he asked absently, going back to his book. "I thought this was his job."

Xander had been surprised to discover that Angel could bury himself as deeply in research as Giles, and read even faster, judging by how quickly he was turning pages. A pile of discarded volumes covered most of the surface of the center table after only an hour, merging with the unorganized stacks Xander *still* hadn't gotten around to dealing with.

Xander himself had done his best, but, unlike Angel, he didn't have clue one what he was looking for. So he'd wound up spending most of his time leafing aimlessly through the card catalogue, plowing through a couple of Giles' encyclopedias of weirdness, and annoying Angel. The last was entertaining, in a super roller coaster 'I'm gonna die this time' kind of way; it was satisfying to give Buffy's Cryptic Guy some grief, knowing the odds were pretty good Angel would let him get away with it. Of course, his other possible response would leave Xander several pints short....

Xander didn't dwell on that particular thought, but leaned back in his chair and propped his sneakered feet up on the table, which Giles usually forbade, but Xander could argue was better for his still-sore ankle. "Giles got a call from Buffy and took off for Toronto last night," he answered Angel's question. "I'm pretty sure they're getting into trouble up there without me, and believe me, I'm going to have my revenge."

He'd tried to keep his voice flippant, but even he could hear the tension behind his quip. Angel looked up again, his eyes serious. "You're worried about them."

"Who, me? Worried about them? Maybe just a little." Angel levelled the Look again, and Xander shrugged uncomfortably, then dropped the casual facade. "Or a lot. Willow got hurt, I think, but Giles wouldn't tell me anything. I *hate* not knowing what's going on."

"And Buffy?"

Xander narrowed his eyes at Angel. Was that a hint of actual emotion showing around the edges there? "Like I said, Giles didn't tell me anything." Angel's face closed back down and Xander felt a quick, unwelcome surge of sympathy. Almost involuntarily, he added, "But he was talking to her, so she's probably more-or-less in one piece."

Angel nodded once, barely, in acknowledgment, a muscle in his jaw working. Then he very deliberately returned to his book.

† † †

Xander dwelled for a little while longer on Toronto and trouble, poking randomly around in the book piles. A thick volume bound in battered black leather caught his eye and he pulled it out, squinting at the words on the cover, which seemed to have far too many vowels and not nearly enough conso-

nants. The pages inside were just as bad, and written in some kind of crabbed calligraphy.

"Um, is this a real language?"

Angel looked over Xander's shoulder; Xander tried not to flinch visibly. His neck suddenly felt very exposed. "Yes," Angel answered shortly, his face hardening. "Gaelic."

Ookay. "Can you read it?"

"Yes." Even more shortly. "It's a compendium, an account of supernatural incidents in Wales. Pretty old."

"Oh." Xander added the book to the 'to be read' stack on Angel's left, and started looking for something written in English. Anything to keep his mind off the girls.

The library phone rang abruptly, the shrill sound breaking the heavy silence that had fallen over the pair. Xander jumped to his feet without thinking, said something which would have gotten him in serious trouble at home when his ankle flared with pain, and limped his way across the room to snag the receiver.

"Sunnydale High School Library and Sanitarium."

"Hi! Haven't you escaped yet?"

Xander felt his jaw drop slightly. "Willow? No way! We were just talking.... I mean, I was just..." He realized he was babbling, decided he didn't care, and gave up all attempts at cool to demand, "Are you all right?"

She apparently had to think about that one, which didn't do Xander's state of mind any good. "I'm... yeah. I'm good. Great. Fine. Now."

"Now." Xander looked suspiciously at the phone, wishing he could see Willow's face. She wouldn't be able to hide *anything* from him if he could see her face. "That would be, as opposed to when?"

"Oh. When? Oh. Um, before I called you. Because... because you weren't home. Yeah. Why aren't you home in the middle of the night?"

"Because, um..." It was Xander's turn to scramble for an evasion. He thought fast, trying not to look at Angel, who was still apparently immersed in a book, but radiated smothered amusement. "Well, you know me, just can't stay away from the books.... I was just finishing a couple of things, you know.... Wait a minute!" he said abruptly, realizing he'd just been distracted again. "I'm tired of people changing the subject. What's going on up there? Is Buffy all right?"

He might have imagined the slight pause before she answered, "Sure. Buffy's fine."

"Oh." That took some of the wind out of his sails. Not much, but some. Willow was still hiding something.... "Well. Good. Buffy's fine, you're fine, everyone's fine. And in Toronto. Without me." The last came out with a bit of self-pity he couldn't quite help.

Willow heard it, of course. "Oh. Poor baby. All alone with the scary books. Finding anything interesting?"

Xander blinked at the phone. Willow had no idea.... He took a quick look at Angel, who had given up on pretending to read about the time Buffy's name had come up, and wondered a little wildly if the vampire counted as something interesting.

"Not really. You know, same ol', same ol'." Well, it was — for the Hellmouth, anyway. "How's Canada?"

"North." Xander rolled his eyes at the deadpan answer, wondering just how sleep-deprived his bud was. "Toronto's pretty cool. Buffy and I went shopping at this *very* major mall. It was a little scary."

"What can possibly be scary about a mall? Unless there were vampires there or something...."

"Not as scary as Queen West, though. Very weird people there."

They talked at the same time, over each other, and realized it at about the same time. Willow started giggling. "Okay. I'll answer you first. No, no vampires. At the mall. It's just *really* big. And crowded. And there's this cool PATH thing that goes under all of downtown, with more stores and things..."

There was something odd about way she'd phrased that, but Xander was a little too tired to try to figure it out. He settled for commenting, a little lamely, "Underground? Doesn't Buffy get enough of that at home?"

"Yeah, but not with stores." She giggled again, and Xander found himself grinning at the sound. He *really* missed them. "Slaying vampires would be a lot more fun if they lived in this kind of underground...."

"Well, sounds like you babes are having some major fun. Without me."

"Well, I don't know if it's *major* fun. It's, you know, a city."

"A city, huh? Been doing the club thing? You and Buffy meet any cool Canadian guys? As opposed to boring old Sunnydale guys?" Xander couldn't *quite* resist another sideways look at Angel, who at least didn't look amused anymore. More like disgusted.

He was almost too busy enjoying scoring off Angel to notice Willow's odd pause before she answered, "No clubs. I don't know if there are any teen clubs. There are some cool cafes... but it's pretty much just been Buffy and me. It's not that there aren't guys. But I wouldn't say we've been meeting them. Well, except for Buffy's cousin's sort-of-boyfriend. He took us to see *Phantom*. But he's older. And he's Natalie's. And... well, obviously he doesn't count."

"Obviously." Xander was staring at the phone again; Willow was babbling, big time, which was never a good sign. It was, in fact, her vocal equivalent of a bunny caught in headlights. "Wil, are you sure everything's all right? I mean, no one's been Slaying, or biting, or any bad-type things like that?"

She laughed nervously. "Oh, come on. You're the one still on the Hellmouth. We're on vacation, remember?"

"Yeah, I remember. Just wanted to be sure you and the Buffster do."

"So what about you?" Willow moved on before he had the chance to ask any more questions. "Is the Hellmouth cooperating with our vacation plans? I mean, it's Spring Break. You have to have *something* to do."

Forced back on the defensive, it took Xander a too-long moment to answer. "Oh, I'm... keeping busy. Helping at the gallery. Hanging at the Bronze. Oh, and spending fun-filled hours staring at stacks of books. Not too exciting."

He saw with annoyance that Angel was fighting to keep a straight face again, and started mentally cataloguing the ways to kill a vampire.

"Well, too exciting is normal for us lately," Willow pointed out. "Maybe boring is a nice change.... So why *are* you staring at stacks of old books at midnight?"

"M-midnight?"

"It's three in the morning here. That's midnight there. What's so interesting?"

"It's midnight? Wow, how the time flies, you know, I had no idea it was that late." What could he *possibly* give as a good reason to be here this late, since the truth was definitely out?

"Go on, tell her about the grey guys," Angel contributed unhelpfully, without looking up from

his book. Xander glared at him, which didn't seem to have any effect, and prayed Willow hadn't heard.

No such luck. "What was that?"

"What was what?" he asked with desperate innocence. There was no way in hell she would buy it, but maybe she'd go along with it....

Oh." She did, and he almost fell to his knees with relief. "Just thought I heard something. Noise on the line, I guess."

"Yeah, line noise." He laughed nervously, knowing she'd drag the details out of him later. "Long distance. So much for hearing that pin drop."

"Yeah. Better call Candice Bergen and complain."

Angel was snickering softly, and Xander tried to ignore him. "First thing in the morning, promise," he joked to Willow. His voice trailed off into an awkward pause. He desperately wanted to know what was going on, needed to know everyone was safe, but couldn't think of a way to force Willow to tell him the truth.

Naturally, they both tried to fill in the conversational space at once. "So, um, you better get some sleep up there, don't want to party *too* much...." he started, at the same time she said, "Okay, well, maybe you should get home and..."

They both broke off and laughed. "Yeah. Right," Willow agreed, "need to get some sleep. Good idea. Um... it's good to talk to you."

"Good to talk to you, too." He paused. "Willow?"

"Yeah?"

"Be careful?"

He could almost hear her soft smile; both of them knew nobody here was fooled. "You too."

"And tell Buffy to keep you guys out of trouble?"

"Do I have to make that stick?"

Xander laughed at the image of Willow making Buffy do *anything*. "Well, you might want to give it a shot. Never know, you might get lucky."

"I might. That'd be a first, huh?"

Oh, yeah." He paused, but couldn't think of anything else to say. "Sleep tight, Wil. Don't let anything bite."

"You too. See you later." He hung up the phone, and stood still, looking at it for a long moment. He should have felt better after talking to Willow, but instead felt much worse. There was something seriously wrong in Toronto, his best friends were right in the middle of it... and he couldn't do anything about it.

† † †

Angel listened to Xander's side of the conversation with amusement, and a little envy. The friendship between Willow and Xander was almost tangible, even over the phone; it had been a long while since anyone had worried about Angel like that. With the possible exception of Buffy, and he'd been bleeding in her kitchen at the time.

He looked back down at his book, trying to distract himself from the memory of that night in Buffy's kitchen — and her bedroom — and his deep desire to grab the phone away from Xander and demand to speak to Buffy. If half of what he'd heard about the Community in Toronto was true, she was in way over her head. If he'd had the chance to warn her before she left....

The thick, black-bound book was the one Xander had found, which had proved to be written in Welsh; it required concentration to translate, which was why Angel had picked it up. He focused on the lousy handwriting, trying not to laugh out loud as Xander made another conversational slip.

A paragraph caught his eye and he leaned forward abruptly, his attention truly and completely caught. Snatches of old legends drifted back, stories he'd half-heard in his long-ago childhood swimming to the surface. It didn't make any sense, but the description both in the book and in those memories fit. But it was ridiculous! What would they be doing harassing a kid in an art gallery?

"Well, Willow's freaked, but nobody'll tell me why, which is pretty much the norm." Xander pulled a chair out and sat down straddling it backwards, startling Angel out of his concentration. The kid was trying to act casual, but Angel could see the worry in his eyes. "I tell you, when they get home, we are going to have a major talk about this little game of 'Let's Drive Xander Crazy'."

Despite his own concern, Angel just couldn't resist. "Oh really? I noticed you told them all about me and the gallery and your... accident."

Xander winced. "All right, point taken, let's move on, okay? That's all I need," he muttered under his breath, "an undead Jiminy Cricket."

Angel very carefully did not smile; after a second, Xander recovered from his sulk. "What's that?" he asked, gesturing towards the book.

"Answers, maybe. The grey guys, did they say anything to you?"

"Nothing that made any sense. Kid stuff, like 'Nobody home' and 'Fall down, go boom'." Xander made a wide, helpless gesture with his hands. "Mostly, they were just making faces, laughing at me. Which I get enough of from everyone else and didn't really need from total strangers, you know?"

Angel ignored the smart-aleck part of the answer, which seemed to be the basic trick to being in Xander's vicinity and not killing him. "That sounds about right," he thought out loud.

Xander waited impatiently, then asked, "Right for what? Can we not keep me in suspense here?"

"Knockers," Angel told him succinctly. Xander looked clueless and he clarified, "Tommyknockers, they're called sometimes."

"Tommyknockers?" Xander blinked. "Like Stephen King?"

Angel gave him a Look. "Don't talk to me about Stephen King. Don't even mention Stephen King when I'm around. Or Anne Rice."

"Right." Xander held his hands up again, warned by Angel's tone. "Never again shall those names pass my lips, I swear. So what's a tommyknocker?"

Angel sat back, mollified. "Welsh spirits, kind of like gremlins. According to this," he held up the book, "and what I remember, they used to hang around in mines, causing mischief. Mislaid equipment, general haunting, that kind of thing. Sometimes, they'd warn miners about cave-ins, but mostly they just liked trouble."

Xander didn't look particularly enlightened. "Isn't Welsh, like, a long way away? Around England?"

"Wales," Angel corrected him impatiently, "and yeah. I don't know what they'd be doing here, but the description's right."

"Waitaminute!" Xander sat up straight suddenly. "Welsh mines. Giles was saying something about that just before he took off.... It was in those books!"

He gestured behind him at a partially unpacked box of old books, trying to get up in the same motion and managing not to kill his ankle this time. Angel matched him, and they knelt beside the pile.

"These are old diaries and stuff," Xander explained, starting to sift through stacks at random. "Giles said some of them are from back when this place was, like, a big mining town, and he said something about Welsh guys."

"What did he say?" Angel pressed, scanning the titles in the stacks nearest to him.

Xander suddenly got very interested in a falling-apart book; what Angel could see of his face looked embarrassed. "I don't know; I sort of took off before he could get really rolling about it." Angel just looked at him and he said defensively, "Hey, you've never had to sit through one of Giles's lectures. You'd have headed for cover, too, believe you me!"

Angel decided just to let that one go, and started riffling through the stacks of old journals and manuscripts. Xander joined him, and the two worked together in oddly companionable silence, side by side.

Chapter 6

"Hey," Xander said after a while, "check this out."

"What?" Angel looked up from a sheaf of papers so old they nearly crumbled at his touch.

Xander was flipping through a leather-bound ledger. "It's some mine owner's journal or something. Listen to this: 'The laborers are complaining again of noises and voices in the mines; the damned superstitious Welsh are claiming there are some kind of faeries wandering around underground, and refuse to listen to reason. They'd like for us to believe that's the reason for all the disappearing equipment — stolen with their own hands, most likely — and the production problems their laziness has brought on the mine. If it were up to them, they'd be leaving food all over the mine for their little brownies, and jumping every time they hear someone working in another shaft. I'd fire them all if they weren't willing to work so hard for the pittance I pay them. Knockers, indeed!'"

"Real nice guy." Xander looked up. "Sounds like our troublemakers, huh?"

"It does." The papers turned out to be letters and newspaper articles; Angel scanned through them, then stopped at a faded piece of newsprint. "Here's something from the *Sunnydale Post-Express*; that used to be the big newspaper here. 'Fifteen miners were trapped in the depths of their own rocky hell, as the Leighton shaft collapsed in on itself yesterday, killing twenty. The entire town of Sunnydale banded together to help the brave souls left helpless in the darkness, finally bringing them out of the ruins of their livelihood.'"

"That's a newspaper article?" Xander interrupted. "Sounds more like 'The Sunnydale Enquirer'."

"Here's the really good part. 'The newly-freed miners claim their lives were spared by a warning from ghostly "tommyknockers", who alerted the miners to the cave-in and made the sounds which led the tiring rescue parties to their living grave.'" Angel studied the rest of the article. "Looks like no one believed them. Not exactly a surprise."

"Welcome to Sunnydale, Denial Capital of the World," Xander agreed. He rubbed at his forehead, which was developing an impressive bruise, with irritation. "Maybe the knockers followed the miners over when they came. The Hellmouth must have seemed like a pretty happening place to hang out — lots of mines, lots of that mystical power stuff."

Angel barely heard him. "The gallery...." he said slowly. "It's on Leighton Street."

"Yeah, it is." Xander's eyes lit up as he got it. "You think Leighton Street is maybe connected to the Leighton Mine?"

"Maybe." Angel stood up and stretched; his tall frame wasn't built for kneeling in small areas. "I guess we should find out. But not tonight."

"Huh?" Xander blinked. "Why not?"

"Because you're going home," Angel told him. "You're about to fall on your face, and I don't

want to have to carry you out of here."

"Nobody has to carry me anywhere," Xander declared, instantly and predictably. He stood too fast, and, equally predictably, almost blacked out, closing his eyes and swaying in place. Angel debated whether or not to catch him if he actually passed out.

Fortunately, the issue didn't come up. "And, as it happens," Xander continued slowly, regaining both his balance and the remnants of his dignity, "I was just about to leave."

Angel didn't comment, but waited for Xander to gather up his scattered gear and lead the way out of the library, locking the doors behind them. They went back through the halls, Xander still limping on his sore ankle, and uncharacteristically quiet.

"Hey, um, Angel?" he finally asked as they went through the front doors.

Angel rubbed the back of his neck, feeling the draining fatigue that meant he'd better eat soon. "Yeah?"

"You said you remember hearing about these guys." Xander hesitated, then continued, "Where did you hear about them?"

Angel sighed, closing his eyes. "My mother used to tell stories. A long time ago."

"Your mother?" Xander sounded startled. "I thought—"

"Go home, Xander," Angel interrupted him before he could finish. He was too tired to deal with those particular ghosts.

Xander blinked, then got the point and started down the front steps, sending an awkward, "Later," over his shoulder.

Angel debated with himself again, then called after him. "You're not going to do anything stupid tomorrow, right?" It was more of an order than a demand.

Xander looked back at him levelly. "And you're asking because?"

Angel thought about it, then shrugged. "Because I don't want anything to happen to Buffy's mother. I owe her one."

Xander was working really hard to keep his face blank, but couldn't quite do it. "Well, the new exhibit's going to open Saturday night. Whatever it is, we—" He had to visibly force the last word out. "—have to deal with it tomorrow night."

Angel nodded agreement. "Tomorrow night, then."

"Right."

"And Xander...." Angel tucked his hands into his pockets for lack of anything better to do with them. He hadn't had to do the reassuring bit for a long time. "Buffy can take care of herself. And Willow."

"Yeah." Xander didn't sound convinced, but then, neither was Angel.

He waited until Xander was almost out of sight before following him.

† † †

The trip back to Xander's house was slow, but uneventful; nothing leapt from the darkness at them. Still, Angel lingered in the shadows around Xander's front yard until the kid was inside, with the door locked securely behind him, before turning to scan the empty street around him.

At least, it looked empty. But Angel knew, with the sixth sense he'd never doubted, that another of his kind was around.

"Stop playing games," he said just loudly enough to be heard. "Come out."

"If you insist." A slender shadow detached itself from the side of a house several feet away and sauntered towards him. "You seem to be making a habit out of bodyguarding mortal children, Angel. Can't you think of anything better to do with your time?"

"Adrianne." Angel clenched his fists as he faced her, ready for trouble. "What are you doing here?"

"Oh, just wandering." She strolled a little closer, tossing her shoulder-length black hair out of her face. In her jeans and tight black T-shirt, she looked like any of a hundred teenagers in Sunnydale, although she was older than Angel himself. "I spent some time at the Bronze, but couldn't see anything appetizing." She shrugged and smiled, apparently lightly amused at herself. "It's so hard to find a good buffet in a city this small."

Angel knew better than to buy the act. "If you're expecting sympathy, go somewhere else."

She pursed her lips and shook her head. "Not sympathy. Advice, maybe. You seem to be doing...." Her eyes drifted past him to Xander's front door. "...pretty well for yourself. Although I thought blondes were more your style."

"Leave him alone," he told her with dead seriousness, ignoring her jab at Buffy. "Believe me, you do *not* want to try making a meal out of that one."

She lifted an eyebrow at him curiously. "I don't? Why would that be?"

"No reason," Angel shrugged, not taking his eyes off her. "Unless you *want* the Slayer to come after you. And you don't."

Adrianne's lips twitched. "Oh, right. You do know all about that." His jaw tightened; did every vampire in Sunnydale know about him and Buffy? "But the Slayer's not around, is she? So what's the problem?"

Given a second to think, he might not have said it; it was only Xander, after all. But the words popped out even as he took a threatening step towards her. "I am."

The amused smile didn't waver, but something ugly flared to light in her dark eyes. "My, you have turned into a Boy Scout, haven't you? And I thought Darla had been exaggerating."

He couldn't help it; he flinched. He didn't want to think about Darla, didn't want to see her face after he'd killed her. He saw it often enough in his nightmares. "Darla's got nothing to do with this."

Adrianne shrugged again, carelessly. "I don't suppose she does, anymore. You and your little Slayer saw to that."

"Is that what this is about? Darla?"

Adrianne laughed huskily; it should have been a pleasant sound, but grated on his nerves instead. "Should it be?" she asked archly. "Maybe it's just about territory."

She took a step closer, touched the chain around his neck with one finger. "Better keep an eye on yours," she breathed into his face. "You never know what might be waiting around the corner."

With that, and a significant final look towards Xander's house, she turned and strolled back off. Angel watched her go, rubbing his chain through his fingers where she'd touched it, trying to rub her off.

"Just great," he muttered. "Knockers in the gallery, Adrianne out playing games, and Xander right in the middle." What would Buffy say, he wondered, if she were here now? Then he chuckled to himself — he probably didn't want to *know* what she'd say.

Taking one last, careful look around, he headed for home.

† † †

It took the sun coming up high enough to beam directly into Xander's eyes to wake him the next morning. He rolled over, groaned, and tried to bury himself beneath the covers again; then the memories of the night before flooded back.

He opened his eyes and stared at the wall. Either he'd had a really funky nightmare, or he'd staked out the gallery with Angel, been attacked by miniature demons, been saved by Angel, talked to Willow, and voluntarily done research. With Angel.

All in all, he would have preferred it if it had been a dream. But his first attempt to sit up convinced him the part about the crates falling, at least, had been real. Every muscle in his body protested as he dragged first one foot, then the other, off the bed and pulled himself slowly and painfully to a more-or-less vertical position.

His ankle didn't hurt as much, at least; he moved almost normally as he padded out of the room, barefoot and dressed only in his shorts, to peer into the mirror in the bathroom. As soon as he saw his face, he was grateful his parents had been asleep when he'd come in the night before, and were now at work.

Half his forehead was covered with a black-and-blue lump the size of a goose egg, with a little bit of dried blood still clinging to it, which would explain why his head was throbbing. His shoulder, arms, and ribs had also developed rainbows of dark color, and his ankle, though close to its normal size, looked like he was wearing one black sock.

"I look like I survived a riot," he grumbled, turning the shower on as hot as it would go. "Bet Angel doesn't even have a stiff neck. There's no justice."

A long, hot shower, five Tylenol and several bowls of cereal later, he was feeling more or less human. Clothes consisted of shorts, a T-shirt and high-top basketball shoes, laced tightly around his still-sore ankle; it was past noon when he left the house, heading for the Summers Gallery. And even before he stepped foot inside, he heard the banging and shouting.

"Oh, *great*!" he groaned as he ran for the front door, ready to defend Buffy's mom. "They're coming out during the day now!"

He slammed the door open on his way in; the 'bang' wasn't even audible over the racket coming from the walls. Mrs. Summers stood near the wall, looking annoyed and upset.

"Mrs. Summers, are you all right?" Xander gasped, trying to get his breath back. "Don't worry, I'll take care of this."

To his surprise, Mrs. Summers didn't even turn around. "Thank you, Xander, but I think I can handle a plumber on my own. Have you found anything yet?" she called towards the open door to the back room.

A few more bangs and a few curses, and a man in gray coveralls that proclaimed him to be a member of the Sunnydale Plumbing Association appeared in the doorway. "Nothing yet," he told Mrs. Summers, as Xander blushed and looked around for a place to hide. Guess the knockers weren't going to be a problem during the day after all. "Your pipes look fine; a little dented, but intact. The problem may be a lot deeper."

Mrs. Summers sighed, rubbing her forehead. "How much deeper?"

The plumber looked apologetic. "'Bout $1,000 to go into the walls, more if I have to go into the foundation."

Xander winced, trying to think of a way to break it to Mrs. Summers that a plumber probably

wasn't going to be able to help. He couldn't think of a good one, and Mrs. Summers sighed again. "Well, I can't have the gallery torn up the day before my opening; it's just going to have to wait."

The plumber shrugged, "Your call," as he returned to the back room.

Mrs. Summers rubbed her forehead again, looking very tired. "I just hope the pipes don't explode in the middle of the reception," she said quietly to herself.

"I, um, don't think that'll happen," Xander tried to reassure her. Monkey Men might come pouring out of the walls, but they probably wouldn't explode.

Mrs. Summers jumped as if she'd forgotten he was there. "Oh, Xander." She turned to look at him, and her jaw dropped. "My God, Xander, what happened to you? Were you in an accident? Sit down, for goodness sakes!"

She fussed and herded him towards a chair in the back room; he protested, but got swept along. "I, uh, wiped out on my skateboard last night, hit my head," he lied. "It's fine, really, doesn't even hurt. Honest."

She didn't seem inclined to take his word for it, checking his head and bruised arms with a mother's professional touch. "It must have just been one of those nights," she said with exasperation. "The pipes go insane, someone vandalizes the crates in back, and you get hurt. I *knew* I should have driven you home last night; my goodness, Xander, you must have been going sixty miles an hour! Did your parents take you to the emergency room to have this checked?"

"No, they didn't," Xander evaded, trying to stand up but unable to get past her. "I'm fine, trust me. I just came to help get set up for tomorrow, the opening, you know. I could clean up the crates in back!"

"You are not working today," she informed him, hands on her hips. "Bad enough you've spent almost your entire spring break here; you're not going to work when you're hurt like this."

"But..." Xander started to protest.

She cut him off with a single look. "Xander, I appreciate all the help you've been, but I can finish on my own. Go take it easy, and watch that ankle, do you hear me?"

"But..."

"Go!"

Slowly, Xander stood up. "I'll probably be at the school library," he said, in a last-ditch effort. "You could, like, call if you need my help or anything."

"Thank you, Xander," she answered patiently and firmly, "but I think I can muddle through on my own. Go on. And don't you dare work too hard at the library, either," she called after him as he slunk out the back door. "Or I'll have to speak to Mr. Giles!"

"Go ahead," Xander muttered under his breath. "I just wish *I* could."

Xander hadn't been in any shape to appreciate just how much of a mess the broken crates had made of the alley. Now, he looked at the jumbled pile of shattered, splintered wood, and the clear space in the middle of it that was about the size of his own body, and appreciated just how close a call he'd had.

The manhole cover was closed and looked innocently normal, as if it didn't separate reality from a bad horror flick. He told himself firmly just to leave it alone, that nothing had happened to the gallery during the day. That everything would be fine.

Still trying to convince himself, he left the alley, carefully not looking over his shoulder.

Chapter 7

Two hours was long enough for him to stop by the library and aimlessly shift a few books around; to stop by Ben & Jerry's and chat with a few school buddies; and to tell himself about ten million times that the gallery would be fine.

Then he wound up back in the alley, standing over the manhole cover and informing himself that he was an idiot, that only a complete moron would go down in the sewer and tunnel system that ran beneath Sunnydale. Vampires lived there, and little grey ghoulies, and probably all kinds of other exotic Twilight Zone escapees. He didn't have a Slayer for protection, or even a so-called 'good guy' vampire. So it would be really stupid to go down alone.

He hefted the cover off the manhole and swung his legs through. He couldn't guard the gallery from above ground without getting caught by Buffy's mom, which would lead to some interesting questions he was pretty sure he wouldn't be able to answer; but he also couldn't go off and leave the gallery unguarded. Underground seemed to be the only alternative.

Even if it was *really* stupid.

He lowered himself through the hole as far as he could, then let himself drop the three feet to the damp cement floor, feeling his ankle protest. It didn't smell as bad underground as he remembered, but it wasn't exactly pleasant. Steeling himself, he brought his flashlight out of his backpack, flicked it on and turned around—

— and found himself less than a foot away from an angry, snarling vampire.

"Gaaah!" He stumbled backwards two steps, tripped, sat down hard, and stared up at Angel. "Are you *trying* to kill me?!"

Angel backed off, his face shifting from vampire mask to human. "Sorry," he apologized, actually sounding sincere for once. "I was expecting... someone else."

"I'm glad I'm not *him*!"

"Her."

"Whatever." Xander tried to make his heart start beating again; he wasn't sure if it was the fright, or Angel's transformation that had shaken him more. "A little jumpy, aren't you? And what are you doing here, anyway? Aren't you supposed to be sacked out in a coffin somewhere?"

"Aren't you supposed to be keeping an eye on the gallery?" Angel returned, carefully avoiding the sun pouring in through the open manhole cover. "From the *inside*?"

As his pulse went slowly back to normal, Xander let his backpack drop to the concrete floor. "Buffy's mom took one look at me and kicked me out, told me to go take it easy."

Angel looked him over. "I can see why. You look like hell."

"Gee, thanks."

Angel's mouth twitched in an almost-smile. "Couldn't you talk Buffy's mother into letting you stay up there?"

"Haven't tried to argue with a mom lately, have you?"

Angel's face closed back down. "Not lately." Xander winced, but didn't apologize; Angel moved a little further back from the sun, hiding his face more in the process. "You shouldn't be down here. It's not safe."

Xander shrugged and slid his back down the rough concrete wall until he was sitting. His ankle thanked him by not throbbing quite so painfully. "It's not like there's much of anyplace else for me to be. And you can't exactly go charging outside if the goonies decide to show up."

Angel's jaw twitched, acknowledging the point, and Xander leaned his head back against the wall with satisfaction. "So, what do we do now? Play poker?"

† † †

Angel prowled through the tunnels below the historic district for the third or fourth time that hour, listening. Several times, he was sure he heard noises, echoing giggles and clanks, but the tunnels were always empty.

He headed back for Xander's position, directly below the manhole, where they figured the knockers would most likely show up to cause trouble. Xander was sitting, his leg outstretched so he could rest his ankle on his backpack; he straightened as Angel came into sight.

"Anything?" Angel asked.

Xander shook his head. "Not a thing, not even upstairs," he said through a yawn. "Figures; when we *want* them to show up, then they make like The Shadow all day."

Angel didn't answer, but settled down against the wall opposite Xander. They sat in silence for several minutes, listening to the tiny, watery sounds of the tunnel. Mrs. Summers had been out earlier, cleaning up the broken wood that had littered the alley, but it was silent on top now. The sun still slanted through the open hole, weakening as twilight grew nearer.

Nothing moved.

At least, until Xander's fingers started drumming a steady rhythm against the concrete, and his non-injured foot began to twitch. Restlessness seemed to pour off him in steady streams, and Angel started seriously considering making another round before Xander got too hyper.

"Hey, Angel?" Xander asked.

Too late. "What?"

Xander was watching him closely, his hands still drumming that irritating rhythm. "Why are you so hot on doing this, protecting the gallery and all? I know, I know," he interrupted before Angel could say anything, "you said because you owe Buffy's mom, but why?"

"After what Darla did to her?" Not to mention what Angel himself had been tempted to do. He could still smell the blood, feel the burning hunger as Buffy's mother had lain limp in his hold.... "She didn't deserve to get caught in the crossfire, but she was, because of me. So I owe her."

"Why should you feel responsible for what Darla did?"

Angel looked at him with disbelief, and growing anger. "What if it had been... what's his name, Jesse, who'd gone after Buffy's mother to get to you? Wouldn't you feel responsible?"

Xander flinched. "Yeah, of course I would. But I'm...." He broke off before he could finish the sentence, maybe sensing how very thin the ice had gotten.

"You're what? Not a vampire?" Angel laughed humorlessly, slouching back against the wall. He brought his knees up and rested his forearms on them, letting his hands dangle. "You don't get it, do

you? I'm not one of them anymore."

Xander leaned forward, his eyes intent. "What don't I get? You drink blood, you can't hang out in sunlight and you turn into the Friday Night Fright when you get ticked off. If you're not one of them, then what do you think you are?"

Angel shook his head tiredly, his anger draining away into plain fatigue. He was so tired of this, all of this. "I wish I knew," he said quietly, more to himself than to Xander. "You don't know what it's like to have something else controlling who you are... what you are. To look at what it did and know that you're responsible."

Xander made a rude noise. "Oh, I don't, huh? Guess Buffy didn't tell you about the hyenas."

Angel looked at him, caught by surprise. Hyenas? "What?"

Xander's grin was crooked, uneven. "I got possessed by a hyena, which, let me tell you, is not a cool thing to be possessed by. I did some stuff that wakes me up in a cold sweat at night." He shook his head, shuddering a little; the memories were apparently not pleasant. "I said things to Willow I would rather have died than even thought. I... attacked her. I went after Buffy."

Angel's eyes sharpened at that, but Xander rushed on, "I didn't hurt her, but only because she stopped me. Then, when it was over, I pretended I couldn't remember any of it, hoping that would help them forgive me. Like, if I didn't remember, it wasn't me."

Angel relaxed a little, but didn't stop watching Xander. "Did it help?"

"Them, maybe. Not me." Xander shrugged uncomfortably. "The worst part of it," he said slowly, as if to himself, "was that I was around for all of it. I mean, I was standing in the back of my head, watching all of it, but I couldn't do anything. I couldn't save Willow, or Buffy, or anyone. All I could do was watch, and hate myself. Like it was my fault—"

He caught himself, probably just realizing what he was saying and who he was saying it to, and stood abruptly, turning and walking a step away. The last beam of dying sunlight stretched down like a wall between them.

† † †

This time, the silence lasted, until long past the time when that final ray of sunlight had died away, leaving the tunnel in darkness. The dim grey light of the streetlamp at the end of the alley flickered down the manhole, casting shadows over the faces of the two people trying to pretend the other didn't exist.

Xander slouched down against the wall, flicking his flashlight idly on and off and pretending great interest in the beam of light. He'd left once when his stomach complained, and had had to resist the temptation to just keep going, to head for the Bronze and pretend none of this was happening. Instead, he'd taken the fast food bags with him, and settled back down in the tunnels to wait.

Angel stood silently a few feet away, occasionally vanishing into the shadows for a few minutes, then reappearing just as silently. His vigilance probably should have made Xander feel better, but instead just made him more uncomfortable.

He'd never talked to anyone else about the hyenas, although he'd wanted to; he couldn't talk to either of the girls without blowing his cover story, and Giles was... well, Giles. But given a choice of confidants, he would *not* have chosen Angel, even if the vampire had listened like he understood — and maybe he actually did. Which was a really scary thought....

When the noise started at last, Xander was almost grateful; the banging and singing was at

least familiar. But the sound quickly grew, the tunnel magnifying it until it seemed the ground was shaking, or the world was ending.

"Where's it coming from?" Xander managed to yell over the noise, forgetting in the chaos that he was trying to ignore Angel.

Angel was on his feet, and seemed to have forgotten as well. "Down here!" he shouted as he took off down the tunnel; Xander followed him as best he could, considering that Angel could move a *lot* faster. They pounded down the tunnel, their footsteps almost inaudible over the racket assaulting Xander's ears.

Angel skidded around a corner without breaking stride, and Xander almost ran into a wall trying to imitate him. He recovered his balance and kept going, plunging further into the network of corridors and sewers, his flashlight playing crazily over the walls as he ran.

They turned again, slamming through a steel-plated, 'Restricted Access' door, and were abruptly in a juncture of four tunnels. Tools and toolboxes were scattered everywhere, as if city workers had been interrupted in the middle of a job. Two acetylene welding tanks were propped up in one corner, and exposed pipes and meters covered the ceiling in an intricate metal jungle, several uncovered bulbs casting light on the situation.

And swinging and pounding on the exposed pipes with fists and metal, chittering and giggling in their high-pitched voices, and generally having what seemed to be a fine old time, were what seemed to be hundreds of knockers.

The fun and games stopped as soon as the knockers realized they had company. Silence dropped so fast Xander thought he'd gone deaf, as tommyknockers froze facing vampire and human.

For a long moment, no one moved. Then one of the knockers screeched and Angel's snarl ripped through the air; Xander would never be able to figure out which one had come first. Regardless, the room was suddenly overflowing with a swarm of shrieking, running knockers, their small bodies coming at Xander and Angel from every side.

Xander swung his flashlight blindly, trying to keep the tiny figures off of him and stumbling as his legs were buffeted by a tide of tiny bodies. Beside him, he heard Angel cursing and snarling, apparently caught in the same assault. The knockers seemed to flood the chamber, the ones that weren't running for the door ducking under the pipes and through the walls.

The flashlight slammed into something soft and he heard a high-pitched wail that ran up and down his spine like fingernails on a chalkboard. Knocker hands clutched at his ankles and calves, and something hard slammed into his injured ankle. He yelped in pain, and barely got his arms up in time to keep his nose from smashing into the floor as he was knocked forward. Feet stampeded over his back, something hard slammed into his ribs, Angel shouted again next to his ear, and doors slammed shut with a series of booms that echoed through the area. The lights went out.

The silence returned as the echo faded, but Xander couldn't persuade his arms to unwrap themselves from his head for what seemed like a long time. He finally forced his muscles to relax enough to let him reach out and find his flashlight.

Fortunately, it hadn't rolled too far. His fingers found the cylinder after only a moment; he fumbled for the on switch and played the beam around the room, which was empty except for Angel, kneeling next to Xander. Angel's face seemed caught between vampire and human, his jaw tight against what had to be real pain. His jacket was torn and blood dripped from his left forearm, but he was otherwise in one piece.

"You know," Xander said carefully, rolling slowly to his back and feeling bruised ribs protest,

"I am getting pretty tired of this."

"That makes two of us," Angel grated. His hand was clamped around his arm, trying to stop the bleeding. The flashlight caught a uniform shirt, probably left by a worker, crumpled in a corner, and Xander managed to pull himself to his feet, staggering over to retrieve it. He offered it to Angel, who accepted it with a brief, "Thanks," and wrapped it in a clumsy bandage around his arm.

"What got you?" Xander asked, as Angel finished and shoved himself to his feet.

"A screwdriver," Angel said through clenched teeth. "Are the doors locked?"

"Haven't tried." Xander managed to stand again and checked the doors that sealed the juncture off from the various tunnels intersecting on it. None of the knobs would turn, and the doors didn't budge, even when he threw his weight against them. "Perfect. The little creeps decoyed us. We're trapped."

Angel smiled humorlessly, his eyes hard with anger. "Not even close." He grabbed the knob of the door they'd entered through, set his foot against the wall, braced himself, and pulled.

With a tearing shriek of injured metal, the lock broke and the door flew open, the deadbolt snapped cleanly in two.

Xander gaped. Angel just staggered back a step, regained his balance, and ducked through the door, tossing an impatient, "You coming?" over his shoulder as he went.

Xander closed his eyes, shook his head, and promised himself a good, long vacation after this vacation. Then he sighed. If the knockers wanted them out of the way this badly, there was no telling what they were planning.

He ran after Angel, back towards the gallery.

Chapter 8

Angel beat him back to the starting point by several feet, jumping effortlessly eight feet up and through the manhole. "Hey!" Xander yelled up after him, slinging his forgotten backpack over one shoulder and searching futilely for a ladder.

Angel's head reappeared in the opening. "Jump," he said shortly, extending his good arm. Xander barely hesitated before taking a running start and jumping, catching Angel's hand. The vampire pulled him up and over the edge.

They headed for the back door of the gallery, Xander stopping only long enough to arm himself with one of the scraps of crate stacked in the alley. The length of board wasn't much of a weapon, but it made him feel better.

The gallery was dark and still, the alley silent. Angel had stopped, crouched outside the back door. "What are you waiting for?" Xander hissed. "Go!"

Angel looked disgusted. "I can't go in."

"What?" Then it hit him. "Oh, for.... This invitation thing could get really annoying. It doesn't seem to be stopping *them*."

Angel shrugged. "I didn't make the rules."

Xander reached for the door and carefully turned the knob. It was locked, of course. "Well, you're invited. As soon as you break this lock."

"Right." Angel didn't even need to brace himself this time, just grabbed and pulled. Wood splintered, the door opened, and the two ducked inside.

"Remind me to introduce Buffy's mom to the concept of a security system," Xander mumbled under his breath, as they crept through the back room. Angel gestured impatiently at him and he shut up, following as closely as possible in the vampire's footsteps. The only light was from the alley streetlamp, coming through the open door behind them, and he didn't feel like accumulating any more bruises by walking into a box.

The main room of the gallery was still and silent; Angel and Xander paused outside the doorway to listen. Nothing. Without looking away from the room, Angel held up one hand, counting off with his fingers. One... two....

"Three!" They both lunged through the doorway, Xander flicking on his flashlight with one hand and swinging his board around with the other, trying to cover everything around him at once.

Nothing happened.

They stood still for a long moment, then gradually relaxed. "Maybe... Maybe they went to invade someplace else tonight," Xander offered, feeling slightly stupid.

"Yeah. Maybe." Angel didn't sound convinced. Xander half-turned, tucking his flashlight under his arm and groping for the light switch, trying not to turn his back on the room as he did it. He

found the switch and turned it on, lights streamed from every corner of the room —

— and the eyes of a hundred silent, statue-still knockers focused on them. They were crouched on pedestals, beneath and behind sculptures, in corners, and even on the light fixtures, their black eyes gleaming harshly and their elastic faces strangely blank.

"This is... not a good," Xander commented, not really hearing himself.

"This is definitely a bad," Angel agreed grimly. Then a high-pitched chorus of wails burst from the knockers, and there wasn't time to think about anything, as a grey wave descended on vampire and teenager.

† † †

If he'd had time, Angel might have felt a moment of admiration for the knockers; they'd set up and executed two back-to-back traps, attacking something that obviously terrified them. But the demon was on him and there was no room for thought, only for fighting.

The knockers lunged for both of them; he batted one aside easily, caught two more by the arms and threw them across the room.

Beside him, Xander was swinging his improvised club with a great deal of enthusiasm, but no skill whatsoever. The sheer fierceness of his attack was keeping the knockers at a distance, though, which meant that many more of them were coming for Angel.

A gang of five tried to tackle him at the knees; he was knocked off balance, and kicked out, sending them sprawling and catching himself against the wall. More knockers swarmed towards him, trying to press their advantage; he snarled at them in full vampiric form, but they kept coming this time. Their hands grabbed and pinched, trying to pull him down through sheer numbers. He snarled again and lashed out, sending knockers flying. But they still came.

"Hey!" Xander shouted from somewhere, and Angel could suddenly see again. Then Xander was right next to him, swinging at the knockers with all his strength. When he connected, knockers went flying with cries of pain, but Angel had to duck fast the times Xander missed; he was *very* grateful there wasn't a point on the wood.

They managed to get more or less back to back again, the knockers surrounding them in a bruised, bloody circle, several of their number lying in unconscious heaps here and there. But there were still plenty of them on their feet, and they looked more determined, if anything.

Xander wasn't putting any weight on his injured ankle, and the cut on his forehead had opened back up, but his young face was grim and determined. "Now what?" he demanded, without taking his eyes off their attackers. "We're getting majorly Custered here, you know?"

Angel snarled at the knockers nearest to him, who looked like they were considering another attack run. They took a few wary steps back, but showed no signs of retreating. "The plan should have come *before* we rushed in here," he informed Xander.

"A plan? Great, *now* you think of that." A pair of knockers showed their teeth at Xander; he took a swing with his club that backed them off as well. "We should probably stop them before they trash the gallery."

"Probably. Got any brilliant ideas how?"

"Um...." Xander hefted his club, and eyed the knockers. "No. So we'll have to go with the stupid idea."

"Why stop now?" Angel muttered. "What's the stupid idea?"

"Attack."

"What?" Angel's protest came too late. Xander had already lunged forward, his club once again slashing towards and through the knockers. Angel swore and grabbed a knocker that had gone instantly for Xander's back, tossing it into three more. All of them went sprawling, but he'd been too busy watching Xander's back to cover his own.

He turned just in time to see the gang of five coming at him again, the one in the lead swinging something, before it impacted with his injured arm. Pain flared and he shouted in rage and agony, his left hand and arm swinging uselessly as he stumbled back under the force of the blow.

Behind him, Xander gave a panicked yell, and Angel saw him go down under a pile of knockers. He snarled and lunged forward, kicking the closest ones off the pile. Then a heavy weight landed on his back, driving him forward, and he tripped over Xander's leg and fell heavily to the floor. More knockers piled on top of him; no matter how many he shoved away with his working arm, they kept coming.

† † †

Xander felt Angel go down next to him, but couldn't see him. He was covered with grey bodies, their hands hard and pinching every inch of his skin. They covered his face, making him fight for breath, and pinned his arms and legs to the ground. No matter how hard he struggled and yelled, he couldn't get free. Beside him, he heard Angel's snarls, but the vampire was just as trapped.

The knockers on his face abruptly cleared, but only for a moment. A wide, scarred face he recognized from the alley leaned in over him, cutting off the light. It grinned evilly and Xander went over the edge into total panic, fighting against his captors with all of his strength.

So it was a second before Xander realized the knocker was speaking, another second before he actually processed the words.

"....protect thee," Scarface was saying, in a squeak like an unoiled door. "Have good fuggan, help the lady. Would protect thee!" Its face curled with rage. "But thee bring darkness into good place, bring evil with thee! Thee will not hurt our place!"

"Hey, it's not *your* place," Xander yelled. "You're the one pulling the haunted house routine!"

"Just warning!" Scarface shrilled. "Warning the lady, but she not listen! Warn thee, think listening, but bring darkness, not help. Bring that!" It gestured towards Angel with utter disgust. "No more warn! Not let thee hurt lady, not let thee hurt place! Hurt place over knocker bodies!"

"Now there's an idea!" Xander tried to move knocker feet out of his ribs with absolutely no success. "We weren't trying to hurt it, that's *your* gig. We were trying to get rid of you!"

Scarface seemed to have actually heard him, that time; it froze, staring down into Xander's eyes. "If not to hurt," it abruptly demanded, "why bring darkness? Why bring drainers? Drainers *only* to hurt."

"Not that one," Xander shot back. "He thinks he's a good guy. I don't know if I agree with him—" He saw its eyes narrow and rushed on, "—but Angel only came to stop you from destroying this place."

"Thanks a lot," Angel grunted sarcastically, trying again to throw knocker bodies off of himself. But there were even more sprawled over him (well out of reach of his fangs) than there were over Xander.

"You're welcome," Xander shot back. "And *you're* the ones who attacked *us*," he continued

towards the knockers. "All we wanted was for your little concerts to go away before you mess up the gallery!"

The knocker stared down at him for another long moment. Then it suddenly backed off, whistling high and shrill. Slowly, grudgingly, knockers began to clear away from Xander and Angel.

The second he could sit up, Angel did, lunging forward with full fright face in place. The knockers squealed and retreated further, except for Scarface, who only flinched.

Xander sat up more slowly, tempted to imitate Angel, and rubbed at his new bruises. His flashlight had rolled several feet away; he reached for it, gripping it like a weapon, or a security blanket, and glared as menacingly as possible at Scarface.

Scarface stood its ground. "Not want to mess up place," it said, hands on hips and black eyes daring anyone to contradict it. "Only want to warn. Then thee bring darkness, more follow. Only want to make dark things go."

Xander pulled himself to his feet, every muscle in his body protesting the movement. "Okay, let's say we'll go with that," he said carefully, seeing Angel stand up. The vampire's arm was dripping blood and he looked really ticked off. "If you were so hot to warn us about something, what was with all of the games? Why didn't you just say, 'Hey, there's a problem?'"

Scarface shrugged. "Sometimes knockers help, sometimes knockers hinder. Want to help, this time, but hard to. No one listens to quiet, so are noisy. Hope would come, look, but only ones that come, not look. When see knockers, run."

"Run fast," someone contributed gleefully from the back. "All run fast."

"Then, finally, thee come, " Scarface continued, ignoring the peanut gallery. "Bring dark things with thee, bad things."

"Yeah, yeah, we've established you're not real keen on Angel," Xander grimaced. "Join the club." Angel threw him a Look, which Xander ignored as much as possible. "What were you trying to warn Mrs. Summers about, anyway? Was it worth all of this mess?"

"Go boom," someone contributed from the mass behind Scarface. "Big boom," someone else echoed. "All fall down."

"Great, we're back to this," Xander muttered.

But Angel looked suddenly interested. "Big boom... An explosion?" he asked, his voice rough with pain. "In the gallery?"

Scarface scowled at him in what seemed to be pure reflex, then reluctantly straightened its face and nodded. "Big problem, under ground. No one listens."

"We're listening now," Xander assured it, starting to catch a clue. "Big time. Show us."

† † †

The knockers, in a chittering, squeaking mass, led the pair back into the alley and back down into the tunnels, towards the junction where they'd tried to trap Angel and Xander.

"What, were you hoping we'd get caught here and someone would come looking for us?" Angel asked Scarface, who seemed to be more or less in charge.

It was also the only one willing to come anywhere near Angel; the rest of the knockers huddled to Xander's other side. "Hope. And need to make thee stay away; hope can warn lady before thee break loose." It slipped through the broken door into the junction. "Come."

Xander looked at Angel, who made an 'after you' gesture with his good arm. Xander shook his

head. "Uh-uh. You first."

Angel shook his head in disgust, but went through. Xander followed, trailed by a sea of grey bodies. Scarface made straight for a small, covered hole they hadn't noticed before, in the confusion of the fight and breaking out. It grabbed the cover and pulled with all of its strength, and a burning, eye-searing smell flooded into the room.

"*Major* grossness!" Xander tried to figure out how to cover his eyes and nose at the same time. "What *is* that?"

"Some kind of chemicals," Angel answered, looking vaguely ill himself, but he still moved forward to kneel beside the hole, looking down. The knocker backed away, eyeing Angel suspiciously; Xander knew just how it felt. "This... looks like an old mine shaft. Is it?"

The knocker nodded, still keeping his distance. "Old mine; ours when we come. People leave and buildings come. No place for knockers, but knockers stay. Then more people come, leave bad things, mines start to smell." It looked very serious. "Knockers sick. Some knockers die."

"They closed up the old mines and built Sunnydale on top of them," Angel thought out loud. "Except someone found an opening, and started dumping... industrial waste, whatever. Whatever they dumped wound up pooling here — below the gallery, below this juncture, where the city's been working." He nodded towards the acetylene tanks in the corner. "Welding."

"The waste makes the fumes," Xander said slowly, the light dawning. "With the welding up here, the fumes could have caught fire, burned everything. Or just... exploded."

"Big boom," one of the knockers contributed helpfully.

"Yeah," Angel nodded, "that would cover it." He half-turned to look over his shoulder at Xander. "You'd better start thinking of a good story about how you found this. I don't think the truth is going to be much help."

"Yeah." Xander nodded his head slowly. "I'm going to have to go with you on that one. I'll come up with something."

Scarface grinned broadly, his mouth almost splitting his face in half. "Not go boom, then!" it said proudly. "Place is safe."

The banging and caterwauling started again, but this time Xander didn't really mind, even though his ears protested strenuously. He was too busy trying to think of a way to tell Mrs. Summers he'd been down exploring in the sewers that didn't make him sound like a lunatic. Nothing came to mind.

He looked away from the reveling knockers to find Angel, and saw that he was still crouched by the mine hole, talking to Scarface, who didn't look thrilled at the conversation. Angel was back to his 'normal' human face, and just looked intense. Xander was about to start over to find out what was going on, but something tugged hesitantly at the hem of his shorts.

He jumped, startled, then saw a small knocker, about half Scarface's size, standing at his knee. It made a face up at him, then grinned. "Thee bring more of good fuggan?" it asked hopefully.

"Fuggan?" Xander asked blankly.

"Good fuggan!" another knocker echoed. "Flat spicy! Good eat!"

"Eat?" Xander was baffled, until he remembered his first encounter with the knockers. "You mean, the pizza?"

Several heads nodded so enthusiastically, it seemed they would fall right off of the skinny necks. "Know thee be not too bad," the first knocker proclaimed smugly. "Bring *good* fuggan with thee."

"I'll bring some more," Xander promised, starting to grin. The cheers commenced again, even louder, and Xander grinned more widely as a bunch of knockers started swinging on the pipes like little kids on a jungle gym.

Some things really *were* universal.

Chapter 9

It was almost midnight before they got everything figured out. The knockers swore they'd quit the banging and harassment, as long as Xander and Angel saw that the mine shafts were cleaned up and the gallery was safe. The knockers even agreed to guard the gallery that night, until the broken lock on the back door could be fixed. Mrs. Summers was going to wig about someone breaking in, but nothing would be missing. It might even get her to seriously consider an alarm system, Xander figured.

Then it was back to the library and Giles's first aid kit. Xander put ice on his ankle again, wishing he could just sink his entire body into an icebag. Angel pointedly did *not* ask for help stripping off his ruined jacket, and Xander didn't particularly want to offer any.

But, unwillingly, he remembered Angel digging him out of a pile of crates, and trying to pull a load of knockers off his back, and offered anyway. "Need help with that?"

Angel didn't look up. "No. Thanks. It'll be fine in a couple of days."

"Fine." Xander resettled his ice bag, his ribs protesting as he bent over, then leaned back in his chair. Angel finally managed to work the jacket off, exposing a jagged gash that ran for most of the length of his forearm. It started oozing blood again sluggishly, but Angel barely winced as he doused it in antiseptic.

"That looks... majorly ouchworthy," Xander said, with reluctant sympathy. Angel only shrugged and pulled out a roll of gauze; Xander blinked as the bleeding slowed and stopped, apparently of its own accord. Very, very weird.

The phone rang before he could comment again, which was probably a good thing. "I wonder if Giles always gets this many calls at night?" Xander groaned, as he hauled himself out of his chair and limped towards Giles' desk. "I mean, I know he practically lives here and everything, but still.... Sunnydale High School Library and Infirmary," he said relatively cheerfully into the phone.

"Hi. There used to be a sanitarium there. Got room for three escaped patients?"

Xander blinked, his mind a little too fogged with fatigue to instantly process the question, or even the speaker. Then it hit him, and he found himself grinning like an idiot. "Buffy! Hey, there's always room for one more, or three even! What's up up north? Ready to come home to the nice, calm Hellmouth yet?"

He had Angel's full attention, he noticed out of the corner of his eye, as Buffy answered cheerfully, "Pretty close. One day of assorted strangers of Russian extraction who happen to be related to me, and then we're on our way."

"Major coolness." Xander noticed absently that he even sounded like an idiot, but didn't particularly care. Buffy was used to it. "Bringing home any souvenirs? Oak leaves? Mounties?"

"They're maple leaves, Xander. Or Maple Leafs. We thought about bringing a couple of them home. No Mounties, though."

" They probably wouldn't have fit in the luggage anyway," he pointed out forgivingly.

" And I think the people here would get kind of upset about us taking them," she agreed with another giggle.

"Giles is coming back with you, right? I'm not going to be stuck on library duty for the rest of my natural life or anything?"

"Yeah, Giles will be back to take over. And Willow too. You're pretty safe."

"Now, *that's* a relief." He faked a heavy, relieved sigh. "I was having visions of wandering the stacks for all eternity. Not a pretty sight."

"Although you seem awfully at home there..." Buffy commented thoughtfully. "What *have* you been up to?"

Xander looked around at the open (and depleted) first aid kit, the books scattered *everywhere*, Angel's bandaged arm, and his own bruises, and decided there was only one possible thing to do. Avoid the question, by any means necessary. "Me?"

"You. Unless there's someone else there I don't know about..." Her voice trailed off, and Xander involuntarily looked back at Angel, who had turned his back and was studying the bookshelves intently. The vampire's shoulders were hunched, his hands shoved into his pockets, and there was blood on his shirt and the neat bandage around his forearm. Blood from helping Buffy's mom... and Xander.

"No, no one here but us humans," he answered slowly. It really was better if Buffy didn't know Angel was here. She shouldn't be hanging out with a vampire at all, and this would just make her depressed. It was for her own good, after all....

He sighed, and gave in to the guilt. "And, uh, one vampire."

† † †

Angel had been trying not to listen, too sickeningly envious of Xander's easy conversation with Buffy. But he couldn't keep from turning in surprise when he heard Xander admit, albeit reluctantly, to his presence.

Xander was concentrating on the phone, refusing to look at Angel. "He hasn't had me for a midnight snack yet, three guesses... Tall, dark, hasn't had me for... No, not any more." Xander winced as soon as the words were out of his mouth, and jerked the phone away from his ear. Even across the room, Angel could hear Buffy's panicked demands for an explanation.

She wound down and Xander put the phone back to his ear. "Whoa, Buffy, chill. We're both fine, it's handled, not a major situation. Honest." Buffy didn't appear to be buying it. Xander appeared to be mentally kicking himself. "Very minor. Almost not worth mentioning at all. Really.... Absolutely not. I've taken care of everything."

Angel couldn't help giving Xander a pointed look. Xander rolled his eyes, and admitted, "Okay, with a little help.... Right, I'll tell you everything. As soon as you get off the plane." Even as he made the promise, Angel could *see* Xander planning what to leave out, and his lips twitched. He almost wished he could hear Xander trying to tell this story.

"Great," Xander was telling Buffy. Then he abruptly stopped and demanded, "Ditto? That's ditto, like, something happened even though everyone said nothing was happening?"

A longer pause, during which Xander relaxed a little, starting to examine the various bruises he'd collected over the last two days. "I think we'll make that the group tour package this time," he told Buffy with a short laugh, which faded with whatever Buffy answered. "Yeah. Yeah, he did earn it."

Another guilty sideways look at Angel, then Xander proceeded to shock the hell out of him by offering, *very* reluctantly, "Do you, um.. want to talk to him?"

The answer was apparently yes; Xander turned to Angel and held out the phone. Angel looked from the receiver to Xander and back to the receiver, and didn't move.

Xander sighed, the patronizing sigh of someone confronted with a particularly dense two-year-old. "Angel, it's a phone. You talk into it. To Buffy."

Angel gave him a dirty look, which was pretty weak since he was distracted, and took the phone as tentatively as if it were a cross that would burn his hand. Xander smirked at him, then surprised him again by very deliberately walking across the library, more or less out of earshot.

He lifted the phone gingerly to his ear, in time to hear Buffy say, "Hello? Angel?"

He had to clear his throat before he could say anything. "Buffy?" Oh, very good, very articulate.

Buffy didn't appear to mind; if anything, she sounded as nervous as he felt. "Hi. I hear you guys dealt with a... very minor situation."

"Yeah." He studied the surface of the desk. "We did."

"Wow. I am truly overwhelmed by your enthusiasm. I should have been there, huh?"

He chuckled in spite of himself. "Yeah, you should have." The words came out with much more emotion than he'd intended.

It took her a second to answer. "Sorry. I got kinda busy. Can I still get a raincheck?"

"Any time. Any time at all." An awkward pause. "I hear you had some excitement yourself up there."

"Some," she admitted. "I'll have to tell you about it. After I get back."

"When's that going to be?" He tried to make the question as casual as possible, and wound up sounding more like Xander, even to his own ears.

Buffy sounded amused. "Sunday soon enough for ya?"

"No."

The blunt, painful honesty surprised even him; it took Buffy a long time to answer. "Me, too," she finally said in a near whisper, and Angel felt something tighten around his heart. "You should have been here too."

"I wish I had been," he said raggedly. Another, longer pause, as he struggled for control of his voice. "You're all right?" He needed to hear her say it, needed even more to see it for himself. To hold her and assure himself she was all in one piece. But he couldn't say that.

"Yeah, more or less. More than less. We all are."

"Good." Nothing was coming out right; he was too far out of practice at this kind of thing. At talking when it mattered. "If I'd, ah, known you were going up there, I would have warned you." And he'd never get over blaming himself for *not* warning her. What the hell had she run into, that he might have been able to protect her from?

She gave a short laugh and he wondered if he imagined the bitter edge to it. "I'll ask next time, if I catch you around. This one kind of followed me from L.A., though."

"Long way to go for a visit. Or a fight."

"Yeah, well, seems some vampires really get around. I think I'll be staying off that express, though. Tough on the system."

"Yeah," he half-laughed with very little humor, thinking about the last few days. "Tell me about it."

"I will. Soon as I'm finished recovering from it." She laughed again, a real one this time, and he joined her. Eventually, though, their amusement petered out and the awkwardness returned. "*Am* I going to get to tell you about it?" she finally asked, with studied casualness.

His heart warred with his self-preservation, which screamed that going anywhere near Buffy was going to hurt far more than it was worth. But he wanted to see her. "I... I don't know. I wish you could."

"Angel, it's just a conversation," Buffy informed him, sounding more than a bit annoyed. "At the Bronze, if you want. Like, with people around to protect my honor or whatever."

Angel found himself laughing again, in spite of himself. He could just see the stubborn, utterly fearless, 'you jerk!' expression on her face, the one she always wore when she was giving him hell. "Are you going to hunt me down if I don't show up?"

Now she was laughing at herself. "Hey, you'd be amazed what I can do when pressed."

"No. I wouldn't."

"Then what's so tough about talking?"

"When talking's not all I want?" Blunt honesty again; it was the only way he could think of to remind her of the dangers. Nothing between them could ever be as simple as 'just talking'.

He heard her take a deep breath. "Point taken. That qualifies as tough. But..."

She trailed off; he had to clear his throat again, and his voice was still bitter. "Yeah. But."

"But talking is some of what I want," Buffy continued determinedly. "Maybe the most important part right now."

"You know this is a bad idea, right?" he tried one last time.

"There are times I think I don't have any other kind. Your point?"

"Doesn't look like I have one." He paused, then sighed a mental 'the hell with it'; he couldn't really regret losing. "I'll see you at the Bronze. When you get home."

He could actually hear her smile, spreading through the phone to him. "It's a date."

"It's a date," he echoed.

"Good." That came out sounding more like a challenge, but it was one he wasn't prepared to take her up on. This time.

The last pause must have gone on too long, or maybe Xander's patience (which had, admittedly, been amazing) finally ran out. In any case, he noisily cleared his throat from the other side of the room and asked, "Are you two going to hang up any time soon? Or are you just going to stand there and breathe?"

Angel did *not* instantly turn and kill him. But it was close. Buffy laughed in his ear, obviously having heard Xander loud and clear. "I guess he's right. I should really take pity on my calling card."

"Take pity on *him*." Angel glared in Xander's direction. "Maybe he'll survive the night."

"Maybe we all will," Buffy sighed, as Xander objected with a loud and injured, "Hey!"

Buffy and Angel both ignored him. "See you around?" she asked, a little wistfully.

"Yeah. You will." Angel hung the phone up slowly, carefully, and stared at it for a long moment. Then he turned to look at Xander; the kid's face was set and antagonistic, and he realized the joking around had been entirely for Buffy's benefit.

"Thanks," Angel offered carefully, turning away from the desk.

Xander nodded once, jerkily, and Angel didn't push it. Instead, he picked the remains of his jacket up from the table and started for the door. He'd wait outside the school until Xander left, then shadow him home again. But he didn't think he could stand staying inside the library any longer.

Xander's voice stopped Angel before he could leave. "You know you're just going to make things worse for her."

Angel refused to look at him. "You think I *don't* know that? But it's her choice."

"Yeah." Xander's voice had a bitter edge. "I guess it is."

Angel didn't even try to answer that. He just went through the double doors, letting them swing shut behind him.

Chapter 10

Xander would have cheerfully paid anyone, anywhere, a million dollars if he hadn't had to get out of bed the next morning. But not only did he have to get up, he had to get up sometime well before noon, which made things even worse. But get up he did; he even made it to the gallery before Buffy's mom had stopped wigging over the broken lock on the back door, but *after* the cops had come and gone.

It took a while to convince Mrs. Summers about what they'd found underground, and even longer to haul the city workers out of bed and down into the sewers; apparently they'd had a run-in with some kind of weird, hairless monkeys the day before. Xander firmly bit his cheek and did *not* start laughing.

Between hassling with the city, talking to the police, installing the new lock on the back door, finishing up the show, and making last-minute catering arrangements, Mrs. Summers never really had time to order Xander out of the gallery again. It was almost three p.m. when they both finally collapsed in the back room.

"If I'd known opening a gallery was going to be this much work," Mrs. Summers groaned, "I would never have thought of it."

Xander smiled weakly. "Yeah, but think of all the fun you'd have missed."

"Finding toxic waste under my building isn't really what I consider fun," Mrs. Summers countered. "My goodness, if you hadn't heard that cat crying and been brave enough to go down into those awful tunnels looking for it...."

Xander shrugged, embarrassed. Okay, it wasn't the best story in the world, but it had gotten the job done. "Guess I'm just a softy for animals. What time does the exhibition start?"

Mrs. Summers didn't seem to notice his haste to change the subject, or if she did, chalked it up to modesty. "Seven p.m. on the nose. Which means I have four hours to go home, get myself looking human, and come back to meet the caterers and get the bar set up." She sighed and rolled her neck. "I must have been out of my mind when we planned this. You've been such a lifesaver, Xander, I don't what I would have done without you."

He really did blush, that time. "Hey, it was no problem," he lied, trying to brush it off. "I was just glad for something to keep me busy, you know."

"Yes, I do know," she laughed. Then her eyes narrowed speculatively at him. "Tell you what, Xander, why don't you come to the opening tonight? You can meet some people, there'll be good food, you can escape to the Bronze when you get too bored...."

Xander tried not to squirm under the knowing, teasing gleam in her eyes. "Hey, thanks for the thought and all, but I don't think it'll be my kind of scene."

"Well, it's up to you. Although, several of the RSVP's said they'd be bringing their children," Mrs. Summers added casually. "I think some of the girls are in classes with you and Buffy. They'd

probably enjoy having someone here their own age to talk to."

Xander's head went up. "Girls? Which girls?" Mrs. Summers grinned at him and he tried, belatedly, to be cool. "You know, culture is an important thing; art can... bring people together."

Mrs. Summers' smile got broader. "Seven o'clock and wear a jacket."

† † †

Which was how Xander found himself, at eight p.m., standing in the gallery with a glass of Coke in one hand, a tie around his neck, and the upper portion of Sunnydale society wandering around making comments about texture and subtext while looking at the results of a high school metal shop gone psychotic.

He had to admit, though, it wasn't *too* bad. His existence had actually been acknowledged by several of the girls from Cordelia's clique — although they'd been more interested in getting him to fetch them drinks than flirting — and Mrs. Summers would occasionally bring some of the adults over and embarrass him by telling them about how he'd 'saved' the gallery by finding the problem in the old mine shaft. Even knowing the truth, all of the attention was pretty good for his ego.

Mrs. Summers was heading for him now, another couple in tow. And behind them trailed... Oh, God. Xander looked around frantically for a hiding place; when he didn't find one, he gulped, tightened his hand on his glass, and prepared to be assaulted.

"Xander, you know Mr. and Mrs. Chase, and their daughter Cordelia, don't you?" Mrs. Summers smiled. She was dressed in a black dress that made her look pretty killer, for a mom. "This is Alexander Harris, the young man who helped me put all of this together."

"We've, ah, met a few times," Xander said, not looking at Cordelia. She was staring off into the distance with an expression that suggested she'd rather be anyplace but there, and that Xander didn't actually exist.

"Xander," Mr. Chase said with a wide politician's smile. "I hear you also had something to do with finding that nasty mess under the streets. Well done."

"Thank you, um, sir," Xander mumbled, calculating how quickly he could get to the door.

"Xander, would you keep Cordelia company?" Mrs. Summers was asking. "I'd like to show Mr. and Mrs. Chase a few pieces."

No, no, please, no! "Sure, I'd be... glad to." He didn't *think* his voice sounded strained; Mrs. Summers smiled and led Cordelia's parents off.

Cordelia took the first shot, as usual. "Well, well, well, look at the hero. I didn't really think you'd be the type to be so fond of sewers, Xander." She paused dramatically. "No, wait, I did think you were the type."

Xander groaned mentally, but, trapped, rose to the challenge. "Hello, Cordelia. What's wrong, couldn't find any brooms to ride on tonight?"

Cordelia looked amused, in the condescending sort of way she was so good at. "Where's the rest of your little cult of weirdness?" she asked archly. "I thought the three of you were surgically attached to each other."

"I defer to your greater knowledge of surgery, Cordelia," Xander smiled broadly and falsely. "The nose job is looking really good, by the way."

Cordelia's eyes narrowed, but her smile, as broad and as false as his own, stayed in place. "And I love the way your jacket matches that lovely shade of blue on your head. What happened, did

someone beat you up when Buffy wasn't around to protect you?"

Xander groped for a witty comeback, failed to think of anything better than 'How'd you guess?' and looked around for a legitimate excuse to escape. Fortunately, he found one quickly — and what an excuse it was. A brunette about his own age, who looked vaguely familiar, was standing uncertainly outside the front door of the gallery, as if she wasn't sure she was supposed to be there. She was also gorgeous and dressed to kill.

"Well, Cordelia, much as I'd love to stand around and trade some more insults, duty calls," he said, relatively smoothly. "Don't worry, I'm sure you can find someone else willing to talk to you. If you look hard enough."

Cordelia huffed and stalked away as he walked past her to the front door, and gave what he hoped was a charming, reassuring smile to the girl. "Hi, I'm Xander Harris. Can I help you?"

"I hope so." The brunette looked gratifyingly relieved at his appearance. "I was supposed to meet my parents here, but I can't find the invitation they gave me, and I can't see them in this crowd."

"That's no problem," Xander smiled more widely, gesturing extravagantly into the gallery. "Come on in and I'll help you track them down."

"This is so nice of you," she smiled sweetly up at him, accepting the invitation and stepping past him into the gallery. "I don't what I would have done if you hadn't come to help."

"Oh, it's no trouble at all." Xander felt himself grow a few inches taller under her admiring gaze, as she laid her hand on his arm. "Always glad to be of service." They started to move into the gallery and he thought to ask, "So, what's your name?"

"Adrianne," she told him with another sweet smile. "My name's Adrianne."

† † †

A few minutes later, they'd established that Adrianne was new in town, that she hadn't started Sunnydale High School, and that her parents were not in the main room of the gallery.

"Maybe they haven't gotten here yet," Adrianne sighed as they completed their third round of the room. "Dad always does run late."

"I can round up a chair, you can sit down and wait for them," Xander offered eagerly. "Or I could get you a drink, or something to eat?"

"Actually," Adrianne said with a bit of embarrassment, "I'd really like to use the powder room. Is there one here?"

"What? Oh, sure, there's one in back." Xander led the way through the crowd, Adrianne clinging to his hand and apparently content to follow his lead. He held the door to the back room open and gestured her in. "Right through here."

She laughed breathily and went past him. "Saved again. Wait for me?"

"Absolutely," Xander assured her. "I'm not budging."

She laughed again and disappeared into the small bathroom; Xander closed the door that separated the back room from the gallery and leaned against it. His tie had suddenly gotten too tight; he loosened it and opened the back door, letting the warm night air sweep in.

Adrianne seemed really nice, pretty and, wonder of wonders, interested in him. But he couldn't keep himself from wishing she had blonde hair instead of dark, green eyes instead of brown — that she was Buffy instead of Adrianne. Heck, he would have settled for her being Willow.

He shook his head, trying to get his mind off the girls. They were fine, they would be home

tomorrow, and there was a gorgeous girl about to come join him for the evening. He could probably even talk her into ditching the opening and going to the Bronze with him....

The thought of the Bronze triggered a memory, but before he could pin it down, Adrianne appeared at his elbow, startling him. "All done," she said cheerfully, laying her hand on his arm again and apparently not noticing his start of surprise.

"Great," Xander replied, forcing his attention back to her and trying to regain his enthusiasm, which wasn't too hard considering how beautiful she was. "We could, um, go back in and look for your parents again."

Adrianne made a face. "I'd actually rather stay back here for a little while. All those people... I'm not very good in crowds," she admitted shyly, with a little shudder.

Xander's protective instincts surged again, and he put an arm around her shoulders. "How about we get some air, then? I can give a lovely tour of a historic Sunnydale, um," he glanced out the back door, "alley."

"My own personal tour guide," she giggled. "It sounds fascinating, lead on."

"Oh no, after you." She laughed at him over her shoulder as she went through the door and Xander followed happily, closing the door behind him. After all, it was a nice night. Why waste it?

Adrianne was standing in the middle of the alley when he caught up, her face turned up to the night sky with evident enjoyment. The alley caught the breeze and strengthened it, blowing her hair back from her face. She smiled at Xander as he walked towards her, and memory abruptly crystallized. "You were at the Bronze a couple nights ago."

Her smile widened. "I didn't think you'd noticed me there. I'm impressed."

"Kind of hard not to notice you," Xander blurted, then winced. Way to be cool, he congratulated himself. Very suave.

Adrianne seemed amused, coming close enough to him to run a finger up one lapel of his jacket. "How very sweet of you," she breathed, and Xander gulped. She'd shifted somehow from adoring potential date to someone that reminded him uncomfortably of... Natalie French.

He laughed shakily, trying to figure out where that thought had come from. This was just a girl, after all, a student, not a giant praying mantis. Nothing to worry about.... But Miss French had looked human, too.

He backed up a step. "Maybe we should, you know, head back inside. If your parents are here, they're going to be looking for you."

She shook her head and slowly stepped after him, still smiling. "I don't think so."

"Y-you don't?" Xander stuttered, taking two steps back this time. She followed again, her eyes catching his, and Xander saw something flaring in their depths. Something he'd seen before, something predatory.....

Something he'd seen in Jesse's eyes, when his best friend had tried to kill him.

That memory triggered others, and he suddenly saw Angel's glance over his shoulder that first night at the Bronze, looking towards Adrianne as he said he'd handle the problem. And Angel's attack in the tunnel, when he'd been expecting someone else. A 'her'. And Adrianne standing just behind the threshold of the gallery, with no invitation.

"Oh, man," he breathed, barely hearing his own voice. The door to the gallery was closed and ten feet away besides; he'd never make it there in time. There was nothing in the alley to use as a weapon, and Adrianne would be on him before he had time to shout.

Adrianne's smile broadened, and he saw the same conclusions he'd reached reflected in her

interested eyes. "Nowhere to run, little boy?" she asked calmly, amused. "I thought it would take longer for you to figure it out. But I suppose hanging around with a Slayer has some benefits."

"N-not so you'd notice," Xander managed to say, taking another slow step back and looking frantically around. The sounds of the party filtered quietly around from the front, but it might as well have been in China for all the good it would do him.

Adrianne matched his step casually, keeping him within reach. "Can we please skip the useless attempts to fight me off or run?" she asked with a raised eyebrow. "They'll only annoy me, and they won't do you any good. You're not going to win, after all."

Her face suddenly shifted, remolded itself, and Xander yelped involuntarily as the vampire snarled and caught his wrist in one hand, even as he broke and ran for it. Her fist tightened until he thought the bone would break, stopping him in his tracks and nearly bringing him to his knees.

Even through the pain and terror, he managed to twist, kicking out at Adrianne. One heel caught her on the knee; she staggered and snarled again, more loudly, before raising her arm and backhanding him across the face.

The force of the blow sent him across the alley; he slammed into the wall and slid down it slowly, seeing the world start greying around the edges. Not again, he thought vaguely, as Adrianne leaned over him. Why did they always hit him in the head?

Then there was no room in his thoughts for anything but the fangs descending towards his neck.

Chapter 11

They were going to kill him. Xander's thoughts whirled crazily as he tried to press himself back into the wall. When Buffy and Willow got home and found out he went and got eaten while they were away, they were going to kill him.

Adrianne was smiling, her eyes glowing yellow, as she took his chin firmly in hand, exposing his neck. Willow's face flashed in front of his eyes, then he was too dizzy to do anything but close them, and wait for the pain. And pray.

Then, like an answer to his prayer, a snarl ripped through the air, and the hand on his chin was ripped away. Adrianne cursed and two bodies hit the ground a few feet away. The sound of a brief scuffle followed, then there was silence, broken only by two sets of heavy breathing.

"I was wondering where you'd gotten to," Adrianne finally said, her voice a low, amused purr again. "You don't bodyguard too well."

"And you don't listen too well."

Xander dragged his eyes open, and saw two vampires facing off in front of him. Adrianne looked human, cool and calm; the other, in full fright mask mode, looked mad as hell.

"I told you to stay away from him," Angel growled, and reality slipped the rest of the way out of Xander's grasp.

† † †

"Are you going to make me, Angel?" Adrianne tilted her head and studied Angel, every inch the bored, lightly amused society butterfly. As long as he ignored the boy she'd just thrown across the alley. "I don't think it'll be as easy as it was when you took the girl from me. No crowds around to protect you this time."

"I don't need any protection from you," Angel told her grimly, taking a step towards her and trying to move himself between her and Xander, who was slumped against the brick, either unconscious or dead. Angel was counting on the first.

"Maybe not," Adrianne smiled sweetly, then gestured over his shoulder. "But how about from him?"

Angel followed her movement — and another vampire appeared at the end of the alley. A big one that he recognized, but couldn't have named to save his life, already fright masked and ready to fight.

"Or maybe him," Adrianne continued with another gesture, and another vampire, at the opposite end of the alley. The lights gleamed off this one's red hair, and Angel recognized the face even before he spoke.

"Hello, Angelus. Imagine meeting you here."

Angel's jaw tightened at the familiar, and extremely unwelcome, Scottish brogue. "Rake." He knew this one — a vicious bastard, one of the Master's favorite pets, older and stronger than Angel himself. But stupider, if Angel could just buy some time to think. "Since when does the Master let you off your leash?"

Rake only smiled widely, showing his fangs; the other vampire laughed, a raw, ugly, grating sound. Angel didn't find the situation nearly as funny as they did.

Adrainne did, though. "Then again," she told Angel, her eyes narrowed speculatively, "you *could* just walk away, and leave the little would-be Slayer to me. Your choice."

Angel's back was to the alley wall now, between the three bad guys and Xander; his arms were out in a defensive stance, as he tried to watch all three vampires at the same time.

"Why the hell do you want him so much?" he demanded, trying to come up with that time. "He's just a kid, he's nothing."

"Oh, I'd say he's more than nothing," Adrianne said consideringly, "especially to the Slayer. And, apparently, to you. Which makes him worth something to the Master."

"The Master?" The strange vampire took a long step towards Angel; he spun partway to face him, then had to spin back when Rake did the same. They had him completely outflanked, he acknowledged, his stomach sinking. This was going to get ugly.

Adrianne knew it, too, judging from the smirk on her face, but it was Rake who answered, "Of course. You didn't think he'd just turn the other cheek when his runaway Angelus started helping the Slayer kill his children, did you? When you helped her defeat the Three? When you killed Darla for her?"

"Forgiveness isn't one of the Master's stronger virtues," Adrianne shrugged lightly, with one shoulder. "So, you can either give the child to us, then tell your little girlfriend the Slayer how you left him to die — which I'm sure would *truly* endear you to her, or...." Her voice trailed off suggestively.

"Or?" Angel picked up his cue, mostly just to keep her talking. He was pretty damn sure he knew what the other choice was.

Adrianne shrugged again. "Or you can fight us and you'll both die. Either way, the Slayer loses two of her allies, and the Master wins."

Behind Angel, Xander twitched and groaned, starting to come back around; Angel shifted and talked fast, hoping to keep Adrianne and her henchmen distracted from the kid. "There's no way the Master thought of this by himself. What's in it for you, Adrianne?"

She smiled, a small, feline curl of her lips. "You mean, besides the Master's approval? Let's just say, I get a meal to replace the one you got in the way of. I'm so grateful you provided such an... easy target for us."

Angel blinked. "All of this is about a meal? Because I didn't let you take the girl from the Bronze?"

"What can I say, Angelus? You shouldn't have interfered in my hunt. What comes between me and my prey... is my prey." Adrianne's smile widened, but any humor that had ever been in her face disappeared as she gestured to the other two vampires. "Take him."

Rake's smile grew, spreading over his face like a nightmare. "My pleasure."

Angel had barely enough time to swear, a mental stream of Gaelic curses he'd forgotten he knew, before the two vampires were on him. He couldn't avoid their charge without leaving Xander defenseless; their combined weight took him down to the pavement, buried under their bodies.

He twisted and managed to drive his elbow into the strange vampire's ribs; bones cracked and

his target swore. Before he could follow up, Rake's fist slammed into Angel's jaw, then grabbed his hair and forced his neck backwards, as the other vampire recovered and pinned Angel's arms to the ground. Angel kicked furiously, but the other two were too strong.

Adrianne applauded lightly, strolling over to look down at Angel. He struggled against the other two vampires, and glared up at her; she wasn't impressed.

"All right, you've got me," he snarled at Adrianne. "You can let the kid go. He won't do you any good."

Adrianne lifted one perfect eyebrow. "A Boy Scout to the end, hmm, Angelus? Sorry, it won't do either of you any good, but I'll be sure to tell the Slayer you *tried* to be a hero. It'll make your deaths so much harder on her." From somewhere in her skirt, she produced a heavy wooden stake, intricately carved, and raised it above her head.

"Wait," Rake demanded harshly, and she stopped. "You're getting the boy. That gives me the right to take care of the traitor."

Adrianne considered, then nodded. "I suppose there's no harm in sharing. Just this once."

She tossed the stake to Rake, who caught it one-handed, and looked down at Angel with satisfaction. "I've wanted to do this for a hundred years, you sanctimonious little backstabber."

"Hope it's worth the wait," Angel snarled back defiantly, pulling one last time against the hands that restrained him. All his fighting did was make Rake's smile wider. He managed to look back at Xander, and hoped the kid would forgive him. Hoped Buffy would forgive him for getting them both killed.

As Adrianne had, Rake lifted the stake high over his head....

And a wild, chittering, squeaking noise filled the alley, pitched to make even a vampire's every muscle lock. A pack of small grey figures vaulted across Angel to land directly on Rake, sending the vampire stumbling back with an angry howl of rage and pain as all hell broke loose.

Angel didn't have any time to wonder why the knockers had gotten in on the game; he was too busy swinging his suddenly-free hand around to smash into the other vampire, who was too busy gaping at the unexpected attackers to duck. Something broke in the vampire's jaw and he fell away from Angel, who immediately scrambled to his feet and landed a hard kick in the vampire's ribs.

"*Damn* you!" Adrianne shouted in fury, but Angel barely heard her. The demon had taken control somewhere along the way, and he welcomed it, letting the rage and bloodlust take over. His opponent tried to get to his knees and Angel kicked them out from under him, dumping the vampire back into the ground. His lips peeled back in an ugly smile as he leaned over and grabbed the vampire by the throat, slamming his head into the alley wall.

The vampire slumped like a sack of garbage, broken and still.

There was no time to enjoy the single victory; behind him, knocker cries became screams. Angel spun just in time to see Scarface, the knocker leader, scoop up the dropped stake and lunge for Rake with it. Rake twisted out of the way, throwing knockers off of him with a bellow of anger. He blocked the stake with one swing of his arm, and caught Scarface by the throat with the other.

A tiny knocker, one Angel vaguely remembered through the red haze of anger as having made friends with Xander, jumped on Rake with a ludicrously high-pitched battle cry, his hands digging for the vampire's eyes in an attempt to rescue Scarface. Rake barely blinked, just grabbed the little knocker with his free hand and flicked him carelessly away. Like Angel's opponent, the little knocker flew across the alley and landed hard against the wall.

Like Angel's opponent, it slumped to the ground in a tiny, crumpled heap, and didn't move

again.

Angel's shout of fury melded with that of the rest of the knockers. As one, they advanced on Rake, who had regained his feet and looked more than willing to take them all on. His eyes flashed with yellow fire, and he met Angel's challenge with a fierce growl of his own.

Knockers converged on his legs and knees forcing him backwards. He swatted and kicked at them and more than a few went flying, with cries of hurt, but still more piled on. Angel waded in, and kicked Rake in the chest, sending him stumbling back. Before he could recover, Angel swung his elbow sharply into Rake's jaw; Rake stumbled, and his foot came down on the stake he'd dropped in the first knocker attack and forgotten.

His arms windmilled as he groped for balance; it might have been funny if Angel hadn't hated him so fiercely. The knockers moved in as Rake hit the ground, and it was Scarface who got hold of the stake, and slammed it down into Rake's chest.

The vampire's dying roar echoed off the walls as his body exploded into dust.

The knockers cheered grimly and Angel nodded in satisfaction. One less vampire for Buffy to worry about; one less danger to guard her from. Not a bad night's work, he though with distant satisfaction.

Then his arm seemed to explode, wiping away anything but the pain. He staggered back under the force of the kick Adrianne had landed to his injured arm, and another kick landed in his stomach, knocking him to the ground. The knockers screamed, but Angel couldn't even moan. The pain ran like fire from his arm through the rest of his body. It was broken this time, he vaguely realized, gritting his teeth against agony, and it was bleeding again, soaking the arm of his jacket like a river.

Adrianne stood over him like a Fury, her face that of a vampire now, no seduction or amusement left in her. Her eyes burned with rage, and she had found another stake somewhere, clenched in her hand and raised above her head.

"*Damn* you," she hissed again. "I hope your cursed, precious soul finds an afterlife, Angelus. I want you to spend eternity knowing what I'll do to the boy, what I'll do to your Slayer when I hunt her down. I want you to suffer the torments of hell!"

The last words came out on a scream and she lunged towards him, bringing the stake down as she came. She came too fast to see, to fast to avoid, and Angel braced himself for death. Her body fell across his—

— and exploded into nothingness, her death scream rising through the night. Her stake clattered uselessly to the ground.

Xander stood over Angel and the pile of dust that had been Adrianne, still holding the shred of broken crate that had gone through her heart from behind. Angel blinked up at him in utter, pain-filled confusion, trying to figure out what had just happened. "Nice timing," he said finally, levering himself painfully off the pavement.

Xander didn't answer; his jaw was clenched, his face dead white and dazed with shock, and his forehead was bleeding again.

Angel could sympathize with the shock part; he pulled himself gingerly to his feet, clutching his broken, bleeding arm close to his body. His arm protested the movement with another flare of hellfire; he damn near blacked out from the pain. Xander was still silent; Angel wasn't even sure the kid was aware of his presence. "You all right?"

After a long moment, Xander nodded slowly, looking at the scattered dust at his feet. "Yeah. It's just... Last time I did this, it was a friend."

"Yeah." Angel looked down at the dust. "Me, too."

From the corner of his eye, he saw something move behind Xander. Something big.

"Watch out!"

Before Xander could move, Angel's good hand snatched for the stake on the ground at his side and threw it forward with what little strength he had left. It was enough — the point penetrated the chest of the third, forgotten, vampire. He staggered in the middle of reaching for Xander, then crumpled to the ground in a puff of dust.

They both stood silently, blinking, this time. Then Angel finally said, "You know, rescuing you in alleys is getting to be a habit."

"Yeah, well, you can break it. I had her right where I wanted her," Xander told him automatically, apparently not particularly caring that both of them knew it was a complete lie. Color and expression were slowly returning to his face. "How'd you know she was here? That they were here?"

"Them." Angel gestured at the knockers with the arm that was still functioning. The ones who were conscious and moving were watching the exchange with wide eyes, and grinned widely and somewhat comically at Angel's acknowledgment. At least, it might have been comical if their eyes hadn't been so grim. "They kept talking about you bringing 'dark things' and 'drainers' to the gallery. Plural, as in more than just me. I thought it was Adrianne, but I couldn't figure out why."

Xander rubbed his forehead, wincing. "Figured it out yet?"

Angel debated slowly, and decided that there were some things the kid really didn't need to know. That Buffy didn't ever need to hear about. "They just wanted to feed, and thought you would be... entertaining." He attempted a crooked, ironic smile. "Getting to kill me was kind of a plus."

"Great," Xander smiled sarcastically, "I'm entertainment for vampires. You could have warned me." His eyes sharpened as he saw the small group of knockers by the wall, and the tiny form they clustered around. "Oh, man, no."

He lunged across the alley and knelt next to the tiny knocker, cradling the little body in his arms. "Is he... um, it... alive?" he asked Scarface, who was giving terse, quick orders to the rest of the knockers.

"Be fine," Scarface assured him quickly. "Take more than drainers to kill knocker, more than hit on head."

As if to prove him right, the knocker in Xander's arms stirred and slowly opened one big dark eye, staring up at Xander. "Bring fuggan now?" it squeaked, almost inaudibly. "Good fuggan?"

Xander blinked, then a slow grin spread itself across his face. "Always thinking with your stomach," he teased the little guy. "Yeah, all the pizza you want, as long as you want it. Promise. I'll even bring ice cream, the good stuff."

"Cooolness." The little knocker's eyes drifted back closed, a broad smile spreading across its face. Scarface gave a few more orders, and several knockers came forward to take the little one from Xander. He stood up to join Angel, and Scarface looked them both over, hands on skinny hips and bony elbows akimbo.

"You go home," the knocker finally ordered, with absolutely no room for argument. "Place is safe, people safe. You go home." Then it marched off after the rest of its pack and they disappeared into the manhole, the cover clattering back in place before vampire or human had time to respond.

The alley was suddenly empty again, except for the two of them. Angel staggered a little as the last of his energy faded with the knowledge that it was over.

Xander got him by the shoulder, holding him up. The kid's face was drawn with fatigue, his

eyes resigned. "You're really messed up," he observed unnecessarily.

"Thanks for the update," Angel gritted through clenched teeth. His arm *really* hurt. "I just need to get home, to feed. Then I'll be fine."

Xander's jaw clenched, then he nodded, once. "Okay. I'd say lead the way, but..."

Angel damn near laughed in spite of himself. "Yeah."

Side by side, the two staggered out of the alley. The small breeze caught three piles of dust, sending it spinning carelessly through the air after them, and from below ground came one high-pitched giggle, abruptly shushed.

Then there was silence again, save for the far-off sounds of an oblivious party.

Epilogue

"....I was bruised and battered I couldn't tell what I felt/I was unrecognizable to myself/I saw my reflection in a window I didn't know my own face..."

Xander played with his Coke, only half hearing the song the current band was covering. Everyone had flooded back into town in time for school the next day, and the Bronze was filled with teenagers feverishly celebrating their last night of freedom. The dance floor was packed, every table taken; Xander had staked out the small corner table at grave risk to life and limb and was prepared to defend it against all comers.

The girls had gotten back in town earlier in the afternoon, and Willow had called Xander approximately ten seconds after she'd stepped inside her house, talking a happy blue streak which he'd tolerated until she'd calmed down enough to make sense. They had eventually agreed to meet at the Bronze after the girls finished unpacking and getting cleaned up.

Unfortunately, Willow had apparently underestimated the amount of time that would take them. Which meant that, for the first time in his life, Xander was not only early, but impatiently watching for the other two, who were late.

"...I walked the avenue 'til my legs felt like stone/I heard the voices of friends vanished and gone/At night I could hear the blood in my veins/Black and whispering as the rain...."

He was resolutely *not* watching for anyone else, even though he was more or less resigned to the fact that the someone else he wasn't watching for would show up eventually anyway. He would just deal with that if... okay, *when* it happened.

"Xander!" The happy shout from across the room got his attention even over the music; he got to his feet just in time for Willow to finish shoving her way through the crowds and throw herself against him, her arms locked firmly around his neck. He hugged her tightly, almost lifting her off her feet with enthusiasm.

Buffy watched them both with a wide grin and Xander returned it unself-consciously, unwinding one arm from Willow and holding it out in invitation. To his surprise and pleasure, Buffy's grin got even bigger and she accepted, wrapping her arm around his waist and laying her head against his shoulder. He tightened his arms around both of the girls, as if that way he could assure himself they were both really all right.

"...Ain't no angel gonna greet me/It's just you and I my friend/My clothes don't fit me no more/I walked a thousand miles/Just to slip this skin...."

Eventually, they remembered that their reunion was taking place in a very crowded club teeming with their classmates and moved apart. But Willow stayed under Xander's shoulder, her arms clasped around his waist, and Xander kept a firm hold on Buffy's hand, not quite willing to let go.

"So," Xander finally said, "did we have a good vacation?"

The girls exchanged looks, and Buffy's lips twitched. "Oh, we had just a stellar time. Giles was

going to come with us, but all the, uh, fun wore him out and he went home to crash so he wouldn't be like, dead tomorrow."

Xander winced, suddenly remembering the condition the library was in. He never *had* gotten around to cleaning up; Giles was going to have a cow.

Buffy was studying Xander with concerned eyes. "You look like you, um, kept busy."

"Who, me?" Willow let go with one hand to pointedly brush Xander's hair back from his bruised, scabbed forehead, and he cleared his throat, really glad they couldn't see the condition his arms and chest were in. "Oh, yeah, that. Long story." He looked down at Willow, whose collar had gapped with her motion, and saw the broad white bandage covering her shoulder. "Looks like I'm not the only one with some long stories."

Willow blushed at Xander's knowing smirk, and adjusted her shirt. "Well, see, there were these vampires...."

"We'd better sit down and get comfortable," Buffy interrupted before Willow could get rolling. "This is going to take a while."

Xander gallantly held chairs for both of them, feeling something tickle the back of his neck as he did so. But he resolutely refused to turn around and see who had just come in.

"....The night has fallen, I'm lyin' awake/I can feel myself fading away/So receive me brother with your faithless kiss/Or will we leave each other alone like this..."

"So," he said cheerfully, taking his own seat back, "you were saying something about vampires? Can't I leave you two alone for five minutes?"

"Hey," Buffy objected on cue, "it was more like five days! And anyway, it wasn't our fault."

"Yeah, yeah, that's what you always say." Xander slumped in his chair, happily settling into the familiar teasing and still trying to ignore the faint twitch of awareness at his back. "So, whose fault was it?"

† † †

"... So, anyway, turns out the real reason CRD, the computer company, got shut down last year is because they got caught dumping all of these illegal solvents in the old mine shafts. CRD managed to keep it quiet and promised to clean it up, but they missed a batch of the stuff, and it pooled up under the historic district."

"Under my mom's gallery," Buffy filled in flatly. "God, if you and Angel hadn't found it...."

"Hey, the knockers found it," Xander interrupted before she could pursue *that* subject any further. "I tell you, they're going to get free pizza for life, for warning us and for..." He caught the train of thought before it could barrel past his lips. "Um, for warning us."

Buffy's eyes narrowed at his slip and Xander offered her his most innocent smile. He and Angel had agreed (for once) that Buffy didn't need to know about Adrianne's attack; she'd be entirely too likely to go into a guilt fit about not being there to take the vampires on herself. He didn't feel too remorseful about leaving huge chunks of the story out; he'd seen the girls exchanging looks and felt Buffy kick Willow at least once, to keep her from saying something. Looked no one was going to get the whole truth tonight.

No problem; he'd work the details out of Willow sooner or later. He just had to use the right approach.

"I can't believe they've lived under the city for all this time, and no one ever saw them," the

eyes open, and rested her head on her mentor's shoulder. "Can I take a nap now?"

"If you promise to wake up to eat some more when we get home."

"I can do that," Buffy answered with a yawn. "I'm starving."

"I don't doubt it." Turning to Nick, Natalie added, "Going by the way you process nutrients, I'm betting she's going to need some serious protein too."

"Uh-oh. Another guinea pig for your concoctions?"

"Nah. Those are only for people who go into a panic at the thought of a bite of steak."

"Nat..."

"Oh, don't worry, you're safe for now. I can only deal with one unique blond patient at a time."

Abruptly Buffy was relatively wide awake again, looking around on the floor, hand at her neck. "My cross. Where's my cross? Giles, stop. I can't leave without it. Angel will freak if he finds out I lost it."

"I see it," Willow volunteered. "I'll get it, Buffy. Go back to sleep."

"Okay. Thanks, Wil." Settling her head back on Giles' shoulder, she mumbled, "My buds are the best. Buds should take care of each other."

This earned a smile from the worried Watcher. "Indeed they should."

As close to casually as he could manage, Nick followed Willow as she retrieved the necklace. "Are you holding up as well as you seem to be?"

"Do I seem to be? Wow. I'll have to ask me how I do that." She bent to pick up Buffy's cross. "Oh, no, it's broken!"

"Only the chain," Nick corrected. "That's easy to replace. I'm a lot more worried about you."

Willow shrugged. "I'm alive. I'm not a vampire. I'm the only person in my head. Nothing left to worry about, right?"

Nick wrapped the girl in a warm hug. "Whatever you say. Come on, let's get you two home to bed."

Chapter 10

It was less than ten minutes after sunset when the knock came at the apartment door, so Giles was surprised to find Nick Knight standing there. "Good evening. I'm afraid Dr. Lambert's gone to work already; something about a late report?"

"I know; it's for my case. I'm on my way in too; I just wanted to stop by for a few minutes, see how the girls are doing."

Stepping back to admit the visitor, Giles answered, "Willow seems quite herself again; she's in the shower at the moment. Buffy's been asleep most of the day, but she was in good spirits at lunch-time, merely tired. And not eager to duplicate the feat that so exhausted her. I'm sure it won't surprise you that she's accustomed to virtually immediate recovery from any injury; this is proving quite frustrating for her."

"I can imagine," the vampire chuckled. Then, in a more serious tone, he added, "They're...amazing."

"They are indeed." Giles followed Knight's line of sight to the small sleeping figure with a glint of silver peeking from her curled hand. "The bright spirits of these children are what stands between us and Hell, Mr. Knight; and Hell has yet to muster a power that can break them. I pray it never will."

"It must be very hard, leading them to fight instead of keeping them out of danger."

"It can be." Giles was talking to himself now as much as to Knight. "I fear for them in their innocence, their faith that good will always win out. Yet that innocence and that faith are their greatest strengths." He paused. "I envy them that. I was much younger than they when I began learning the lore and preparing to train the Slayer to come. I remember watching my father drill Melanie for hours on end, honing her senses and her fighting skills. I remember watching her go out again and again with stakes in her satchel and a smile on her face. And I remember the tears in my father's eyes the night she went out and never returned." Giles' own cracking voice betrayed him. "She had just turned eighteen. That was the only time I ever saw my father cry."

Knight's quiet voice startled him. "And he wasn't alone, was he?"

"I was too shocked to weep for her then, actually. I was fifteen, and until that night had firmly believed Melanie was invincible." He cleared his throat. "Of course, I also had a devastating crush on her. It was unimaginable that she could be gone. But she was; and for the first time I understood the price of a Watcher's destiny, of being part of what had seemed a terribly thrilling game." He looked over at Buffy again. "When the time came, it was my duty to seek out and guide that one girl in all the world...a girl who may never have the opportunity to grow into a woman."

"She's full of surprises, Giles." The vampire managed somehow to make the statement without a hint of irony. "I wouldn't put it past her to beat those odds along with all the others she's trampled."

The Watcher had to smile at that. "Nor would I. But I must never forget it is my responsibility to even those odds as best I can, for her, and for Willow and Xander when they follow her into the fray."

"I don't think they're in any danger of you forgetting that." Knight pulled a small white box from his pocket. "I brought something for Buffy; then I'd better get going before I get in any more hot water with my partner."

Opening the box, he drew out a sturdy silver necklace chain, a twin to the one that Marcel had snapped from Buffy's cross. Silent as shadow he crossed the living room and, to Giles' surprise, gingerly extricated the pendant from the sleeping girl's hand. There was a little sizzling sound, and he quickly threaded the new chain through its loop, his jaw clenched and hand shaking slightly even when the chain was secure and the cross itself dangled several relatively safe inches from his blistered skin.

During this operation Buffy opened first one eye, then the other, and finally commented, "That looks not fun."

"Hi." Knight smiled through his obvious discomfort. "I didn't mean to wake you."

"'Sokay." She pushed herself into a sitting position, holding out her hand. "Maybe you should give me that before you hurt yourself any worse. You're as bad as Angel." He relinquished it readily, and a bright smile lit Buffy's face as she examined it. "You fixed it! It's exactly the same."

"Well, it seemed like this Angel was someone pretty special." Knight's answering smile was a bit more subdued; but then any adult's would be. "I figured he might worry about you if he saw it broken."

"He worries anyway. Now I just have to decide how much to tell him." She gave the vampire a thoughtful look for a moment before adding, "I wish he could meet you. You'd probably have a lot to talk about."

Knight nodded; she had not directly mentioned Angel's vampiric status, nor the nature of her own relationship with him, but it was hardly necessary. "Maybe we'll have to do that sometime."

† † †

It was one a.m. Not twenty hours ago, Buffy had done several impossible things before breakfast, and now she couldn't sleep. She climbed out of bed as quietly as possible to avoid disturbing Willow, taking the cordless phone with her into the kitchen.

On a hunch, she dialed the library first. Sure enough, the first ring was answered by a ragged-but-relatively-cheerful Xanderish voice. "Sunnydale High School Library and Infirmary."

So the gag was running into theme and variations. "Hi. There used to be a sanitarium there. Got room for three escaped patients?"

"Buffy! Hey, there's always room for one more, or three even!" Though still ragged, Xander's response was considerably more cheerful. "What's up up north? Ready to come home to the nice, calm Hellmouth yet?"

"Pretty close. One day of assorted strangers of Russian extraction who happen to be related to me, and then we're on our way."

"Major coolness." Xander sounded about as looped as she felt. "Bringing home any souvenirs? Oak leaves? Mounties?"

"They're maple leaves, Xander," she giggled. "Or Maple Leafs. We thought about bringing a couple of them home. No Mounties, though."

Mock-seriously (at least, she was pretty sure it was mock), he pointed out, "They probably

wouldn't have fit in the luggage anyway."

"Yeah. And I think the people here would get kind of upset about us taking them."

There was a slight hesitation, then, "Giles is coming back with you, right? I'm not going to be stuck on library duty for the rest of my natural life or anything?"

"Yeah, Giles will be back to take over," Buffy assured him, suppressing more giggles. "And Willow too. You're pretty safe."

"Now *that's* a relief." He punctuated it with an operatically huge sigh. "I was having visions of wandering the stacks all eternity. Not a pretty sight."

Picturing it, Buffy had to agree; but she also had to take the golden opportunity he left dangling. "Although you seem awfully at home there...what *have* you been up to?"

"Me?" He couldn't possibly believe that innocent tone would fool anyone who had known him for more than four minutes.

"You. Unless there's someone else there I don't know about..."

Was that a gulp? "Well, actually, you know... No, no one here but us humans." Another heavy sigh, this one rather more sincere. "And, uh, one vampire."

The word snapped her frayed nerves to attention. "What? Who?"

An even heavier sigh, this one of the long-suffering variety. "He hasn't had me for a midnight snack yet — three guesses."

Not that she needed them, but for a moment she didn't know what to say. What was Angel doing there?

After several seconds, Xander prompted, "Tall, dark, hasn't had me for...."

Abruptly she found her voice, and it actually sounded reasonably with it. "Angel? Is something up?"

"Not any more."

Was Cryptic Guy Syndrome contagious or what? "Any more? What happened?" she demanded. "Are you okay? Is Angel?"

"Whoa, Buffy, chill. We're both fine, it's handled, not a major situation. Honest."

She took a deep breath, forcing herself to calm down. "Okay. A minor situation?"

"Very minor," Xander assured her, too quickly. "Almost not worth mentioning at all. Really."

"Really. Not worth mentioning. Good." She wasn't sure she believed him yet, but as long as he and Angel were both in one piece she could deal for now. "So it's not like I've been shirking important slayage duty or anything, right?"

"Absolutely not. I've taken care of everything." She didn't think Angel would let him get away with that one, and sure enough he amended, "Okay, with a little help."

Buffy grinned, genuinely relieved. "Great. Well, then, thanks for covering for me. You're gonna fill me in when we get home, right?"

"Right. As soon as you get off the plane."

"Cool." She could accept that. Without thinking, she added, "And ditto."

"Great." Pause. Nope, he hadn't missed the slip. "Ditto? That's ditto, like, something happened even though everyone said nothing was happening?"

"Oh. Ditto? Did I say ditto?" Her turn for the heavy sigh; no way was she getting away with this one. "Yeah, I did. And I will. I promise. But we're all fine too. Just ready for a post-vacation vacation."

"I think we'll make that a group tour package this time."

"And ask the travel agent for a vampire-free zone," she added wryly. "Unless Angel wants a ticket too. Sounds like he earned it." It was as broad a hint as she could manage while maintaining some level of cool.

"Yeah. Yeah, he did earn it." Xander sounded as every word were being dragged from him against his will. "Do you, um...want to talk to him?"

She told herself her response was suitably casual. "Oh. Sure. Put him on."

There was a pause, then she giggled at Xander's muffled voice: "Angel, it's a phone. You talk into it. To Buffy."

She allowed enough time for the handover, but still nothing. "Hello? Angel?"

Funny how a guy who didn't need to breathe still sometimes cleared his throat before speaking. "Buffy?"

"Hi. I hear you guys dealt with a...very minor situation."

"Yeah. We did." Whatever had happened, Angel was still his same old cryptic self.

"Wow. I am truly overwhelmed by your enthusiasm." She left a token pause for a response that wouldn't happen, then prompted, "I should have been there, huh?"

That sexy half-chuckle shot a shiver through her; boy, would she be in trouble if he ever *really* laughed! "Yeah, you should have."

There was a weight to the simple statement that Buffy chose to interpret as meaning he was saying more than he was saying. At least, she hoped so. "Sorry. I got kinda busy. Can I still get a raincheck?"

"Any time. Any time at all."

Ooh, she'd have to remember to hold him to that. Assuming she remembered the conversation; insomnia or no, she couldn't believe she was still this tired.

"I hear you had some excitement yourself up there." Wow. Now Angel was doing the prompting. She must really be slipping.

"Some," she allowed. "I'll have to tell you about it. After I get back." Which would require him to *talk* to her when she got back. She was rather proud of herself for that one.

"When's that going to be?" Sooo super casual. And about as convincing at it as she was.

"Sunday soon enough for ya?"

"No." Angel's blunt honesty surprised the hell out of her, and probably himself.

What the hell, she might as well confess. "Me neither." Might as well confess more. "You should have been here too."

"I wish I had been." There was a long pause; she wondered if she should say the same, but then he went on, "You're all right?"

"Yeah, more or less." Not for the first time she was grateful that the Slayer's gifts included rapid healing; he would utterly wig if he saw her throat right now. Hopefully the bruises would be mostly gone by Sunday night. "More than less. We all are."

"Good." Back to Cryptic Guy, tone saying it all. It was enough. "If I'd, ah, known you were going up there, I would have warned you."

She didn't miss the ironic humor of the statement; warnings did seem to be his specialty. He also sounded guilty about not doing so, but that would have involved being told she was going. Buffy laughed shortly. "I'll ask next time, if I catch you around. This one kind of followed me from LA, though."

"Long way to go for a visit. Or a fight."

"Yeah, well, seems some vampires really get around. I think I'll be staying off that express, though." It was a bad joke and a murky reference, but she left it that way, curious whether he would take the hint, and how much he knew about vampires literally flying or about Slayers learning their tricks. "Tough on the system."

"Yeah. Tell me about it." That damn, ironic half-laugh again. Which gave zero indication whether he had a clue what she was talking about.

"I will," she promised. "Soon as I'm finished recovering from it." And she would, but right now it just didn't make any sense. Still, they both laughed softly for a moment, trailing away into Yet Another Awkward Pause. Well, he might have forever, but for her they added up. "Am I going to get to tell you about it?"

"I... I don't know. I wish you could." He didn't have to add the *but*, or any of the things that came after it.

And he was right, up to a point, but that didn't prevent her getting a little annoyed in spite of herself. "Angel, it's just a conversation. At the Bronze, if you want. Like, with people around to protect my honor or whatever."

"Are you going to hunt me down if I don't show up?" Back to ironic amusement, which was at least progress of a sort.

"Hey, you'd be amazed what I can do when pressed."

This earned the closest thing to a real laugh she had ever heard from him. "No. I wouldn't."

"Then what's so tough about talking?" she persisted.

"When talking's not all I want?"

Okay, so much for humor. Fun while it lasted. "Point taken. That qualifies as tough. But..."

"Yeah. But."

"But talking is some of what I want. Maybe the most important part right now."

Angel sighed; she knew he was going to give in even before he reminded her, "You know this is a bad idea, right?"

"There are times I think I don't have any other kind," she returned. "Your point?"

"Doesn't look like I have one."

Buffy grinned to herself; she had him fair and square, and they both knew it.

"I'll see you at the Bronze. When you get home."

"It's a date," she declared triumphantly.

"It's a date," Angel echoed.

"Good." If it suddenly sounded more like a mild challenge, well, she could handle that. Angel, though, wasn't about to take her up on it.

In the long silence that followed, she heard Xander somewhere fairly near Angel. "Are you two going to hang up any time soon? Or are you just going to stand there and breathe?"

"I guess he's right," Buffy agreed ruefully. "I should really take pity on my calling card."

"Take pity on him; maybe he'll survive the night." Angel's tone was equal parts annoyance and relief. She really had succeeded in putting him on the spot.

Ignoring the indignant sound Xander made in the background, she replied, "Maybe we all will. See you around?"

"Yeah. You will." She was fairly sure there was some kind of smile in his tone before the line went *click* and he was gone.

Epilogue

"Hey."

Natalie nearly went through the roof at the soft voice behind her. "How many times do I have to tell you not to do that?"

Holding up his hands, Nick returned, "How hard do I have to slam the door? It's not all me, you know. There are times when the entire company of *Riverdance* could sneak up on you. Including the musicians."

"Did I *ask* you to invade my lab and accuse me of being oblivious to my surroundings?"

"Not oblivious. Just...unusually wrapped up in what you're doing." He nodded toward her computer screen. "So what *are* you doing?"

"Abusing provincial property for personal projects," Natalie replied cheerfully. "The results of those genetic tests came back this morning, and I've been puzzling out what they tell us."

"On Buffy, you mean?"

"And several others, for other variables or for controls. You, me, Giles, Willow, Tracy. One of O'Neal's samples from the freezer. Beth—the new intern—for a normal mortal female, Urs for a normal vampire female."

It was such fun to watch that light bulb go on over his head. There were some concepts his poor little rote-educated mediaeval brain might never wrap itself around, but it *was* capable of the occasional non-military intuitive leap. "The 'favor' you wanted to ask from her."

"Yep."

"Anything interesting?"

"Potentially. I'd have to have a much wider sample base to be sure of anything, but I have several suspects for the gene marker or markers for 'resistors'. Some interesting commonalities between Buffy and O'Neal. I also want to try to track down some more detail on some commonalities between them and the vampire samples, and some of the same and some different ones between Giles and Willow and the vampire samples. None of which are present in Beth or Tracy."

Nick raised his eyebrows at her. "Or...?"

Good boy; he hadn't missed the omission. "I'll get to that in a minute." She pulled up a graph file. "This is a representation of the data on Tracy's results, indicating which of the markers in question she does or doesn't have. My preliminary hypothesis is that the 'resistor' gene is in either this group or somewhere through here. Or maybe both, who knows?" Opening three more files, she went on, "Okay, these are Buffy, you, and me. See where she and I have the same possible 'resistor' genes as Tracy?"

"Okay, I'm with you so far."

"Good. Stay with me just a minute more; I won't even be able to guess much else without a truckload more data." Natalie took a deep breath. "Except one thing. Now, I'm about to get onto a

subject here that's always been pretty touchy, but especially lately. And frankly I don't want to get into it right now any more than you do, so if we both agree to drop it after this..."

He sighed. "Nat, just say it."

"Okay. Just thought I'd warn you. When"—she refused to say *if*—"when you become mortal again...well, I have just one word for you."

Nick watched, puzzlement evident on his face, as she pointed and clicked and dragged and clicked again, overlaying his graph on her own. She moved the resulting combination side-by-side with Buffy's, to which it was almost identical.

"Adoption."

† *fin* †